



Evelyn

Orlan Orphans, Book 5

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Evelyn

Orlan Orphans Book 5

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Introduction

Evelyn Sanders is a smart, confident woman, who is tired of the games boys play. She wants to marry, but she needs someone who will be honest with her and treat her like a lady. When one of her students misbehaves in class, and she meets with his father, she is unprepared for the feelings that spring to life for him, despite his seemingly uncaring attitude about his son's misdeeds.

Frank Keifer moved to Nowhere, Texas, to start a ranch and escape the unhappy memories of his ancestral home in Georgia. When his son acts up in school, he hatches a plan to make the pretty teacher's assistant in town his son's private tutor. Even he isn't sure if he does it to get his son a quality education or to get to know the pretty lady. Will he be able to trust his heart enough to fall in love again? Or will he spend the rest of his life alone and sad?

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Chapter 1

Miss Whitten turned her back to the class to write out the assignment for the first readers' class on the chalkboard, while Evelyn passed out the essays that had just been graded.

Evelyn Sanders had been the teaching assistant in the school there in Nowhere, Texas, for several years. She loved her job, because she loved children, but more importantly, she liked to be in charge. Telling people what to do, and having them obey her orders, gave her a special kind of thrill she'd never admit to anyone.

While she was passing back the papers, she caught Daniel Keifer putting a frog into Jane Jackson's bonnet. Evelyn rushed in, removed the frog, and went to the backdoor of the schoolhouse to free it. "You'll need to stay after school with me today, Daniel. Again."

Daniel Keifer was their "problem child." He was always doing something he oughtn't. Evelyn and Miss Whitten had spent hours trying to figure out the best way to motivate him to put his excess energy into his studies, instead of tormenting his classmates.

"Yes, Miss Sanders," Daniel replied, his voice belying the agreement of his words.

Daniel and his father had moved to Nowhere just a few months before, and Evelyn knew the boy had no mother. What had happened to her was a mystery, but she was certain Miss Whitten would be finding out soon. She would have to go visit Daniel and his father to discuss the boy's problems.

Miss Whitten frowned at Evelyn. "What happened this time?" she whispered after Evelyn joined her at the front of the room.

Evelyn whispered what she'd seen, and Miss Whitten gave a brief nod. "I guess I'm going to need to talk to his father." Her voice made it plain just how much she did not want to have to talk to his father.

"Yes, you are. Have you met him yet?"

Miss Whitten shook her head. "He's one of the few parents I haven't met. I'll send a note home with Daniel, asking when a good time for me to come by would be. Would you be willing to go with me? You know, half the women in town would have heart attacks if I went out to see him on my own."

"Of course, I will." It was Evelyn's least favorite part of the job, but she'd do it. She knew that Miss Whitten couldn't very well go see a single father on her own.

Two hours later, Daniel was sitting at his desk writing lines. "I will not torment the other students in class," had been assigned to be

written two-hundred times before the boy could leave. Evelyn found things to do around the classroom, doing some of their Friday afternoon cleaning, despite the fact it was only Thursday.

An hour after school was over, the door of the building opened with a loud bang. "Where's my son?"

Evelyn looked up from the desk she was polishing to see a tall, handsome man in rancher's garb enter the building. "Mr. Keifer?" she asked.

"Yes. Why's Daniel so late?"

Evelyn frowned. "It's nice to meet you, sir. I'm Evelyn Sanders, the teaching assistant here."

The man folded his arms across his chest and glared at her. "Why did you keep my boy after school?"

Evelyn bit back the sharp retort she wanted to make. No, she'd have to keep calm to deal with this man. "He put a frog in the bonnet of a little girl during class today, so I had to keep him after class."

"You don't know that it was him! It could have been the boy beside him."

"It could have, except for the fact I was passing out papers at the time and watched it happen. I assure you, Mr. Keifer, I'm well aware of what goes on in this classroom, and Daniel is not being accused of something he didn't do." She glared at the man, determined not to back down from his stare.

Mr. Keifer frowned at his son. "Is that true? Did you put a frog in a girl's bonnet?"

For a moment Daniel looked between Evelyn and his father, looking as if he was trying to decide if he should lie. After a moment, he shrugged. "Yessir. She told me she wouldn't kiss me if I was the last boy in Texas and richer than King Solomon."

"What are you doing trying to kiss girls anyway? You're thirteen! You've got your whole life for kissing girls. Now you're supposed to be learning, not kissing."

The boy shrugged. "She's right pretty, and she makes eyes at me. I know she wants me to kiss her, and she acts like she does, but then she acts like she doesn't. Makes me crazy."

Mr. Keifer's eyes went back to Evelyn. "Why aren't you watching out for things like this in your classroom? Shouldn't the girls be kept away from the boys?"

Evelyn blinked once, trying to determine if she'd heard correctly. "This is a one-room schoolhouse. How do you propose we keep the boys away from the girls?"

"That's your problem, not mine." Mr. Keifer looked down at his son. "Come on. Time to go."

Evelyn walked around to see if he'd finished his lines. "How many

have you written?"

The boy dotted an I and passed her his papers. "Two hundred."

Evelyn looked over the papers and nodded. "You're dismissed." She looked at Mr. Keifer. "Miss Whitten and I will need to speak with you at your earliest convenience about Daniel's behavior." As much as she hated the prospect, she would do it, because it was her job.

"Look, Miss whatever-you-said-your-name-was. It's your job to keep the boy in line during school hours. Don't come to me thinking I'm going to make your job easier, because I'm not." With that, Mr. Keifer clamped a hand down on his son's shoulder and strode from the room.

Evelyn stared after him, furious. It wasn't his job to ensure his son didn't cause problems in their school? What was his job then?

She gathered up her things and shut the door of the school behind her, heading across the street to the ice cream parlor. Two of her adopted sisters were going to meet her there, and she was anxious to tell them how awful her day had been.

When she arrived, she saw both Penny and Gertie sitting at a table off to one side of the room. She collapsed into a chair at their small table. "What a day!"

Gertie looked at Evelyn with wide eyes. She was obviously surprised to see the unflappable Evelyn upset. "What happened?"

"Daniel." No other words needed to be spoken. Evelyn had complained about the boy so often at the supper table, they all knew who he was.

"What did he do this time?" Penny asked sympathetically. She had only graduated a couple of years before and was now working in the mercantile, making shirts for area men. She had dreams of opening her own dress shop, but for the moment, she'd do the work that was there.

Evelyn sighed. "I caught him putting a frog in Jane's bonnet."

Gertie bit her lip to stifle a smile at that. "Jane's a sweet girl. She comes by the library at least one afternoon per week." Gertrude was the librarian for the small library there in Nowhere.

"She's wonderful and certainly doesn't deserve frogs in her bonnet." Evelyn sighed, wishing she could give the boy's father a piece of her mind. "Of course, it's quite obvious where he learned to act the way he does."

"Is that so?" a deep voice asked.

Evelyn closed her eyes for a moment, bracing herself for the verbal storm she knew was coming. She knew better than to talk about one of her students. "It is so." Evelyn got to her feet, more than ready to go toe-to-toe with the volatile man.

"I'll have you know I don't put frogs in girl's bonnets," Mr. Keifer

said, his eyes twinkling.

Evelyn crossed her arms over her chest and glared. "How dare you make a joke out of your boy's bad behavior! If I had a boy who acted the way he does, I'd be too embarrassed to show my face in public, and you stand there laughing about it!"

"It's not like he killed someone or burned down the schoolhouse. He was having fun. He's a boy, and that's what boys do."

Evelyn looked around for the boy in question. "Where is he? Out tormenting more innocent girls?"

"He's waiting in the wagon."

"I see." She didn't, though. Why would a father leave his son in the wagon while he ate ice cream?

"I saw you come in here, so I followed. I thought about what you said, and I think you should come by on Friday night to talk about Daniel's behavior. I'll make sure I have food on hand for you to cook for us." He tipped his cowboy hat as he headed toward the door.

Evelyn chased after him, furious at his words. "You can't expect me to come to your house and cook your meal!"

"That's exactly what I expect. If you want my attention, you'll have to make sure I'm fed first. Good day to you." He strode out of the ice cream parlor while Evelyn stood sputtering after him. Why the man needed discipline even as much as his son did. Someone needed to take a switch to both of them!

Evelyn turned back to her sisters, her face red with anger. As she walked back toward the table, a man caught her arm. "Are you sure you won't go out with me, Evie?"

Evelyn wrenched her arm free of the young man's grasp. "Abner, I told you last time you asked that I'm not interested in a man who plays childish games."

Abner was known to take out a different girl every night, and that wasn't what Evelyn was looking for at all. She wanted—no she *needed*, a man who would treat her like a lady. One who was looking for a real relationship. She was not going to have her head turned by an immature child, like Abner.

He smiled the grin that had won him the hearts of half of the girls in town. "Oh, come on, Evie. I'm not playing any games. You're the only one I love."

She shook her head. "I know better. Go back to your other young ladies and leave me alone. I'm not afraid to tell Cletus about you!"

Abner took a step back, the fear on his face palpable. Cletus Sanders was not a man to be reckoned with. Sure, he was crazy as a loon for marrying Edna Petunia, but he was also the richest man in town. And now that he had his law degree, it was known all over town that he planned to make a bid for judge with the next election.

No, Abner didn't dare face the man.

Evelyn saw that her words had worked, and she rushed back to rejoin her sisters. Penny held up a glass dish filled with ice cream. "I got you some ice cream."

Evelyn gladly took the frozen treat. "Thank you. Maybe some sugar will make me feel better about having to deal with that man tomorrow night."

Gertie grinned. "Are you really going to cook for them? I'd love to see that!"

"It's not like I don't know how to cook," Evelyn protested.

"Of course you know how to cook," Gertie responded. "It's taking orders you don't know how to do! And that man isn't going to take no for an answer." She looked positively elated at the idea of her sister fighting with the man.

"No, I don't suppose he is going to take no for an answer, but that doesn't mean I'm going to do whatever he wants, just because he wants me to." Evelyn shook her head. "If he wants a cook or a maid, then he can hire one. I'm not his servant."

Penny and Gertie exchanged looks. "No, you're not anyone's servant," Penny assured her. "But that boy probably hasn't had a home cooked meal in months. I wonder what happened to his mother..."

Evelyn groaned. Her sisters knew her well. "Fine. I'll fix a meal for them, but just one! I'm not going to let the man manipulate me again."

"Of course you won't, Evelyn. You're not the type to be manipulated easily. Why, you must be the only young woman who has ever been able to resist Abner's charms."

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Abner's not worth the time it takes to reject him."

Penny stifled a giggle as a girl at the next table glared at Evelyn. "I don't think Annie Petrowich agrees with you!"

"Annie Petrowich thinks the most important thing in the world is making sure you're wearing your white gloves when you leave your house in the mornings. Does she realize we live in Texas? It was over eighty degrees out there today, and she was in her gloves. No, I'm not really all that worried about whether or not Annie Petrowich likes my opinion of Abner."

Annie glared at Evelyn again. "You don't know when to stop talking, do you, Evelyn?"

Evelyn shrugged, not caring about Annie's opinion. The girl had been a pain in her backside since she had first set foot in Nowhere. "I guess I don't."

Annie said nothing more, just continuing to glare at Evelyn.

Finally, the three sisters finished eating and left, starting their walk home.

“I wish Cletus would let us have an automobile,” Evelyn remarked as they walked. “I would love to learn to drive one.”

Penny giggled at the thought. “I could just see you with a scarf tied around your neck as you drove about town, almost knocking over would-be suitors.”

“I wouldn’t run over suitors!” Evelyn protested.

“Not if they were acceptable to you!” Penny agreed.

Evelyn knew her sister was right. She was too picky by far. She’d already declined four marriage proposals and far more suitors. It was a good thing Cletus was so good to them about the men they would marry. He said they could marry for love or live out the rest of their days under his roof. He didn’t mind either way.

Evelyn had a feeling she’d always live in the Sanders’s house. It was a lonely thought, but what else could she do? There just wasn’t a man out there who was man enough for her.

If a fellow was interested in her heart, he would need to take it like a man.

Chapter 2

When they walked in the front door a while later, Edna Petunia was in the kitchen, cooking for her large family. Evelyn and eleven other girls lived in the huge house with Cletus and Edna Petunia.

Evelyn walked into the kitchen and put on her apron. The girls took turns helping with supper, and it was her night. Again. It felt like it had just been her night the day before.

“What’s troubling you?” Edna Petunia asked after a brief glance at Evelyn’s face.

Evelyn sighed. “Daniel Keifer. Again. I swear that boy is going to put me in an asylum someday!”

Edna patted Evelyn’s shoulder before moving back to the chicken she was rolling in flour to prepare it to fry. “What did he do this time?”

Evelyn briefly related the story as well as Mr. Keifer’s reaction to it. “And now he expects me to cook dinner for his family tomorrow. Do you believe?”

“Sounds like he has his eye on you.”

“There’s no way. No man interested in me would act that way!”

“Just because you’re used to men falling at your feet and begging for your hand, doesn’t mean they all will.” Edna Petunia glanced over her shoulder at her adopted daughter.

Evelyn refused to respond to that. She glared at Edna instead.

“We’ll bake a cake together after supper for you to take with you, and you can cook whatever he has on hand when you get there. Do you want to take one of your sisters with you as a chaperone?”

Evelyn shook her head. “No, Margaret will go with me.”

“Margaret Whitten will be the perfect person to have in your corner. Don’t let him intimidate you.”

“Intimidate me? Why would I ever let a man do that?” Evelyn breezed out of the kitchen to set the table, thinking on Edna Petunia’s words. No, he wasn’t going to intimidate her one bit.

After supper, Evelyn joined Edna Petunia and Cletus in the formal parlor, sitting with some math pages she’d agreed to grade.

“I don’t know that I have the ability to behave well enough to be a judge’s wife, Cletus,” Edna Petunia said, her knitting needles clicking away as she sat snuggled up to Cletus. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Cletus wrapped his arm around Edna Petunia’s shoulders. “I’m sure. We need a fair judge in this town. It’ll be easier to watch out for

my girls.” His glance moved across the room, landing on Evelyn. “Any men in your life?”

Evelyn shook her head. “A few have been asking and making pests of themselves, but they’re boys, not men. I’m waiting for a man to take my heart.”

Cletus nodded. “You just let me know who takes it, and I’ll make sure he’s good enough for you. And remember, Edna Petunia wants time to plan a nice wedding this time.”

“Yes, sir.”



* * *

After school on Friday, the following day, Evelyn set out with Daniel and Miss Whitten for the Keifer Ranch. “Pa said fixings for supper were in the icebox, and he’s not going to discuss anything until he’s filled his belly.”

Evelyn looked at Miss Whitten, biting her tongue. “I’ll cook. We have to stop by my house along the way to pick up a cake I baked last night.” She hadn’t wanted to, but Edna Petunia had insisted, saying her bastards needed to always show their best side.

Honestly, Evelyn didn’t know if she was a bastard or not, but if Edna Petunia preferred to think of her as one, she wouldn’t complain. The woman loved bastards. She’d been left on the doorstep of the orphanage back in Orlan, New York, as a small child. No one knew who her parents were, something that had always bothered her. She’d found love and acceptance since coming to Texas, though, and she had no complaints.

“It’s along the way, so it’s no problem,” Margaret responded. “Do you want help cooking?”

Evelyn shook her head. “No, you can grade papers while I cook, so you won’t lose too much of your free time.”

They stopped at the Sanders’s house, and Edna Petunia came out. “Well, hello there, Miss Whitten. Are my younger girls behaving in school?”

“Of course. You have the sweetest daughters.” Miss Whitten smiled at Edna Petunia. She’d been in town just a short while longer than the older woman.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. If you ever have trouble with any of them, I want you to tell me all about it.”

“I will.”

Evelyn took the cake from Edna Petunia's outstretched hands. "Thank you."

Daniel eyed the cake. "Do I get some of that?"

"Do you think you've earned it?" Evelyn asked softly. She hoped he could see the error of his behavior.

Daniel made a face. "Why should I have to earn it? You're going to share with my pa, and he hasn't earned it."

Evelyn shook her head and smiled at Edna Petunia. "I won't stay out too late."

"I'll have Cletus drive Miss Whitten home in the wagon, so both of you come right back here. I don't want either of you out alone after dark."

"Yes, ma'am." Evelyn turned and walked down the dirt road toward the Keifer Ranch. "Why did you and your father decide to move to Nowhere?"

Daniel shrugged. "He said it was time for a new start. Ma died last year, and Pa said he was done living with ghosts. So we moved."

Done living with ghosts? "I'm very sorry about your ma. You must miss her a lot."

"Yeah. I do. She died having a baby."

They had finally reached the ranch and walked up to the house. It was empty, so she went right to work in the kitchen. It was dirtier than it should be, so before she even thought about cooking, Evelyn cleaned the worktable and the stove carefully, while Daniel went out to help his father.

She peeled potatoes and started them boiling, while taking a jar of green beans out to heat on the stove. She found a chicken, already cut into pieces waiting for her, so she efficiently rolled it in flour and fried it, keeping the finished pieces warm in the oven.

She wasn't the cook her sister, Sarah Jane, was, nor the cook that Edna Petunia was, but she'd helped them both enough that she could put a meal together without too much trouble. It didn't bring her the kind of joy teaching brought her, but she wouldn't complain about it too much.

By the time Mr. Keifer and Daniel came into the house for supper, everything was just warming, waiting for them to arrive. Margaret had set the table, and they were sitting together grading papers.

Mr. Keifer walked in and took a deep sniff of the delightful odors filling his house. "Someone can cook!" he said, his voice filled with surprise.

"Well, since you all but ordered me to do so, I thought you'd be pleased if it was actually edible." The unpleasant tone to Evelyn's voice surprised even her, and she felt Margaret's eyes on her. "This is Miss Whitten. She's the teacher."

“I see. It’s nice to meet you, Miss Whitten.”

Margaret nodded. “Likewise.” She hurriedly helped Evelyn put the food onto the table so they could all eat.

As soon as they were seated, Mr. Keifer bowed his head and prayed for them all, thanking God for the meal He’d provided.

Margaret brought up the problems in the schoolhouse as soon as they’d all filled their plates. “Daniel has been a disruption since the first day he entered our classroom. He’s picked fights with other boys, tormented the girls, and generally made a nuisance of himself. If he continues on the way he is, I’m going to be forced to expel him.”

Mr. Keifer made a face. “Expel him? For pranks?”

Evelyn knew she should let Margaret talk, but she just couldn’t. “It’s more than just pranks. He’s been in a fistfight in the classroom that resulted in a black eye for me. He’s scared some of the girls with snakes and lizards. He put a frog in a girl’s bonnet. You cannot keep excusing his behavior.”

He looked down at his son, whose head was bent low over his food, and sighed. “I’ll talk to him. We never had these problems when his mother was alive.” He felt the weight of trying to raise the boy on his own. His wife had been so good with their son, but now that he was on his own, he couldn’t seem to do anything right.

“I’m very sorry for your loss, Mr. Keifer. I wish we could just give him time to adjust and heal, but we need to be able to keep order in the classroom.” Margaret frowned. “Maybe he needs to have a tutor for a time, until he can learn the correct way to act in the classroom.”

“A tutor? Is there anyone qualified for that role?” He liked the idea of Daniel not being able to disturb the others, but still learn. He would have liked to keep his son out of school to work with him, but one of the last things he’d promised the boy’s mother was that he’d make certain he finished school.

Margaret looked at Evelyn. “Could you do it? Maybe you could spend half the day in the classroom in town and half the day here?”

Evelyn sighed. It sounded like a good solution, but she’d be under Mr. Keifer’s thumb, and she didn’t like that idea at all. “I suppose it’s possible.”

“The classroom isn’t nearly as overcrowded as it was when you and your sisters first came to town. I really don’t need you like I used to.”

The words were meant kindly, but they still felt like a stab to Evelyn’s heart. She knew her job was no longer essential, but she loved working with the children so much. “I suppose I could work for Mr. Keifer instead.”

The man nodded gratefully. “I’d sure appreciate that.”

She sighed. *In for a penny in for a pound, right?* “I’ll take over the

household duties as well, Mr. Keifer. I can make sure you and your son have good, healthy meals.”

“I’d appreciate that, Miss Sanders.” He took another bite of his mashed potatoes and smiled. “I sure will enjoy eating someone else’s cooking rather than my own.”

“We can work out all the details after supper,” Evelyn said with a meaningful look at Daniel.

Once the meal was over, Evelyn and Margaret worked together quickly and efficiently to clear the table and wash the dishes.

Mr. Keifer sat at the table with Daniel, enjoying the cake Edna Petunia had sent. Once they were finished, Daniel went to his room while Mr. Keifer spoke with Evelyn. “What are you going to need to be paid for this?”

Evelyn shrugged. “I don’t need much. My parents provide well for me. I like to have spending money of my own.” She was currently paid the sum of twenty-five dollars per month for being a teaching assistant. “Would ten dollars a month be too much?”

He shook his head. “That sounds like a fair sum to me. Is it fair to you?”

“I truly want for nothing. I can receive money any time I ask for it.”

“I had no idea your folks were wealthy.”

She shrugged. “I was adopted when I arrived in Texas a few years ago. My adoptive father is wealthy, and he’s been nothing but generous. I had the choice of working for a wage or doing some sort of volunteer work. They insist we don’t sit idle. I chose to work for a wage, simply because it’s what I wanted to do, not because I needed the money.”

“Well, then that sounds good to me.”

“It’s a deal. Do you want me to start Monday, Mr. Keifer? Or would it be better if I waited a week or two?”

“I think Monday would be good, if you don’t mind.” He frowned at her. “And please, call me Frank.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. I’m your employee.”

He shrugged. “You’ll call me Frank, or I’ll send my child back to school in town to torment all the other students.”

Evelyn gasped in shock, and then let out a quick giggle. “I guess I’ll call you Frank then.”

“I had a feeling you’d see things my way.”

Evelyn and Margaret took their leave, walking back toward the Sanders’s home. “I hope I’ve made the right decision,” Evelyn said, worried a bit.

“You made the best decision for the children in town and for me. I’m just not certain you made the best decision for you. Although...”

“Although, what?”

“He is awfully handsome. I wouldn’t mind having daily contact with him.”

“Daniel?” Evelyn asked, pretending not to understand.

“Mr. Keifer.” Margaret sighed. “Sometimes I hate being a spinster school teacher.”

Evelyn laughed. “At twenty-eight, you’re hardly a spinster.”

“That’s not how the men in town feel.” Margaret shrugged. “One of these days I’m going to throw caution to the wind and become a mail order bride.”

“Oh, I can just see that!” Margaret put up with even less nonsense than Evelyn did from men. She couldn’t imagine the sweet teacher marrying a man sight unseen.

Margaret linked her arm with Evelyn’s with a smile. “I’m going to miss teaching with you, my friend.”

Evelyn sighed. “Not as much as I will. We’ll have to set a day to have ice cream together every week.”

“Saturday, after lunch!”

“That sounds lovely. Shall we start next week? We’ll have so much to talk about by then!”

Margaret smiled. “That sounds wonderful. I’ll be there.”

Chapter 3

Evelyn went to the schoolhouse early on Saturday to clean out the things she kept there. She hoped she would be going back to help teach, but Margaret shouldn't have to work around her belongings in the meantime.

While she was working, her thoughts kept drifting to Frank Keifer. She couldn't quit thinking about how soft his lips looked, something she'd never even considered about another man. Sure, a boy or two had kissed her back in New York, but since she'd been in Texas, she'd never once stepped out with a man. For some reason, now that she was no longer in school, courting seemed a great deal more serious than it had back in New York.

She put all of her things into a crate and shut the door behind her, wishing tears didn't sting her eyes at the idea of leaving the children behind. Yes, she'd have more control over her day with the Keifers, but all of the children, most of whom had become dear to her, wouldn't be a daily part of her life. Oh, she'd see them at church on Sunday, but how would that be enough?

Evelyn sighed as she headed toward home. It was an unseasonably warm day in March, but really, what else was new? Texas was just plain too hot for a New York girl like her!

She'd barely gotten onto the street when a wagon pulled up beside her. "Would you like a ride?"

She turned and looked to see who was offering and stopped short. "Mr. Keifer!"

"Frank."

"Frank." She blushed. Why was she blushing? What was it about this man that was tying her stomach in knots all of a sudden? Two days ago, she'd hated him. Today...well, she wasn't so certain any longer. "I—yes, a ride would be very nice."

He set the brake on the wagon and jumped down, taking the box from her arms and putting it in the back of the wagon. "I just went to the mercantile to pick up some nails."

Evelyn smiled. "Nails are good." She took the hand he offered and climbed up into the wagon. "Where's Daniel?"

"He's home working. The ranch hands keep an eye on him."

Evelyn wasn't certain what to say to a man to whom she was attracted. She was usually fighting suitors off, not trying to figure out how to let them know she would welcome their advances.

“What were you doing in town today?” Frank asked, trying to keep from staring at the beautiful girl beside him. He still couldn’t believe his luck. Not only would he have a private tutor for Daniel, but he was also getting a cook and a maid out of the deal. And she was easy on the eyes. So easy on the eyes, he was starting to think of her as a lot more than just a teacher for his son.

She shrugged. “I thought I’d clean my things out of the school. It’s not fair to ask Miss Whitten to keep working around them when she won’t be receiving my help.”

“How long have the two of you worked together?”

“About four years. Ever since my sisters and I moved here from New York.”

He smiled at her. “New York? I didn’t think that accent sounded like Texas. How many sisters do you have?”

“Fourteen.” She was surprised he didn’t know her history. Everyone else in town did. Of course, Frank was relatively new to town. She’d told him about being adopted, but maybe she hadn’t mentioned the other orphan girls who had all been adopted with her.

“Fourteen? Your parents needed a hobby!”

She blushed at the reference to making babies. “No, they’re all adopted sisters. We were raised together in an orphanage in New York. We had to move here a few years back with the matron who ran the orphanage. When we arrived, the house we’d been promised didn’t exist, so one of the women in town decided to adopt us.”

“Someone adopted fifteen girls? Are you kidding me?”

Evelyn shook her head, laughing. “I’m not joking. Do you know Cletus and Edna Petunia Sanders?”

“I don’t think I’ve met them, but I sure know Cletus’s name. He’s running for judge.”

“That’s right. He’s my new father.”

“Wow. He’s got my vote just for adopting all of you. Is he a good father?”

She shrugged. “He’s a good man. I was already seventeen when we moved here, so I didn’t feel like he had much to do with raising me, but he’s let us all stay until we marry or decide to leave on our own. He indulges Edna Petunia and her desire for bastard children.”

Frank frowned at her words. “Don’t call yourself a bastard!”

“Well, I probably am one, but that’s not why I say that. Edna Petunia is a—” *Oh, dear. Are there even words to describe her?* “Let’s just say she’s a colorful woman, who thinks differently than others. She’s always wanted a houseful of children, but she had to be seventy by the time she married! So when she found out there were girls who needed adopting, she opened her home and her heart to the ‘bastards.’ For some reason, she’s always had a soft spot for bastards. So we

indulge her, knowing that she's using the term affectionately."

"You can't use the term bastard affectionately!" he protested.

"Maybe you and I can't, but Edna Petunia can. You really should meet her. She may be old, but that woman is a force to be reckoned with." She shrugged. "I always knew the matron in the orphanage back in New York loved me, but never in my life have I felt love like I feel from Edna Petunia. She truly is a warm, loving, giving person. She'd never admit it, though."

"She sounds—colorful!"

"Oh, she is. I've never met anyone like her." She pointed to the house off to the right. "That's my house."

He gaped at the huge, fancy house. "You live there?"

She nodded, laughing slightly. "Big, isn't it? Don't worry, though. I grew up a dirt-poor orphan."

Frank frowned. "Looks like life changed a great deal for you when you moved to Texas."

"Oh, it did. In a way we'd never dreamed it would."

"And all of you still live there?"

"No. Three of the girls have married and live with their husbands and families. I'm the oldest still living there." She stared at the house for a moment, thinking about the first time she'd seen it. It was much bigger than the orphanage she'd lived in growing up, and it had every comfort.

He pulled up in front of the house and hurried around to help her down, removing the box from the back. "Shall I carry this in for you?"

Evelyn bit her lip, thinking about how it would look to Edna Petunia to have a man carry her things inside. Of course, Edna was sure to have noticed the wagon in the front. "That would be most kind." She hurried ahead and opened the door for him.

Edna Petunia came out of the kitchen carrying a wooden spoon, which she shook at Evelyn. "Did you get everything you needed from town?"

Evelyn nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Edna Petunia, this is Mr. Frank Keifer. He's going to be my new employer."

"Oh, so you're the one with the unruly brat." Edna Petunia looked him up and down. "Have you thought about rewarding him with peppermint sticks for good behavior?" she asked, pulling a peppermint stick from between her voluptuous breasts. "I find children respond very well to candy."

Frank stood staring at the older woman before him for a moment, his arms still cradling the box. "I will take that under advisement, Mrs. Sanders." *Unruly brat?* Obviously, Evelyn had talked about Daniel.

"Oh, call me Edna Petunia. Everyone does." She took a bite of the peppermint stick, crunching down into it. "You need to make sure to

treat Evelyn right. She's a good girl and doesn't need any trouble from a young widower."

He nodded slowly, not certain how to react. "Where do you want me to put this, ma'am?"

Edna Petunia shrugged. "I have no idea. Evelyn will let you know." She walked back into the kitchen, effectively dismissing him.

Evelyn bit her lip and pointed to the room across from the kitchen. "In the informal parlor."

He followed her into the room, setting the box on a low table. "You were right. She's a force to be reckoned with," he said softly.

"She's been wonderful to me and my sisters. I couldn't have asked for a better home."

"I can see that." He caught her hand in his. "Walk me out."

Evelyn looked down at her hand held in his large one. She felt a tingle pass through her body at the sight of it dwarfed as it was. What was it about a man with big hands that made her feel so tiny and protected? "All right." Getting too personal with her employer probably wasn't a good idea, but oh, how she wanted to.

Once they reached the wagon, he turned back to her. "What time do you plan on being at the ranch on Monday?"

She pulled her hand from his, putting a proper distance between them. "I will be there around half past eight to start school with him. If you'll make a list of things you want done, I'll make sure to accomplish them first, or if you'd rather, I can just look and do whatever I see needs to be done."

He frowned as she backed away from him. He didn't like that at all. "Just do whatever you think needs to be done. Do you want me to come and get you in the wagon? Or do you want to walk?"

"I'll either walk or ride. There's no reason for you to come get me."

"You ride?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, Cletus thinks it's something every woman should be able to do. I wish he'd teach us to drive a car instead. I have a feeling automobiles are going to be more important modes of transportation than horses in a few years."

"I think you're right about that. Does he own an auto?"

She shook her head. "No, it's just wishful thinking on my part that he'll get one. I've always wanted to learn to drive."

"Well, I'm not sure that women should drive. I drove an auto back in Georgia before we moved here, and it's hard work to shift the gears. And starting a car isn't easy."

"Oh, so you don't think I can do it because I'm a woman?" she asked, her voice deceptively soft.

"You're not one of those suffragettes, are you?"

She frowned. "I could be if I wanted to be, but no, I'm not. I just

believe that women are stronger and more capable than men give us credit for being.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, refusing to talk about the subject of a woman’s strength with her. “Well, I guess I’ll be seeing you Monday morning, then.”

“Why don’t you attend church?” she asked with a frown. She’d rarely missed a day of church in her life and firmly believed going to church was just what Daniel needed to help him learn to behave properly.

He shrugged. “We’ve honestly just been too busy since we’ve been in Texas. I’m still trying to get my ranch off the ground, and giving up Sunday as a workday would be hard for me.”

“Would you like me to walk to your house to fetch Daniel for Sunday service?”

He frowned at that. He’d attended church every Sunday in his life before moving to Texas. “No. Daniel and I will be there. We should have started back to church a long time ago.” He looked at her for a minute, debating his next words. “Why don’t you pack a lunch and we can take Daniel on a picnic?”

She cleared her throat, surprised by his words. “Together?”

He nodded. “I’d like to get to know you better, Evelyn. You fascinate me.”

She blinked a few times at that, trying to understand. “Why would I fascinate you? I assure you, I’m just like every other girl around.”

He threw back his head and laughed at that. “Any other girl would have immediately backed down when I talked to her the way I did on Friday afternoon. Most girls are married by your age, and you’re still available. I’d like to know why.”

She shrugged. “I guess I just haven’t met a man who was ready to take my heart yet.”

“Take your heart?” He’d never heard anyone discuss falling in love in such an odd way.

“Yes. I’m looking for someone who can take my heart. I’ve had boys beg for it, but I don’t want a boy at this point in my life. I want a man.” She pushed her long blond hair back over her shoulder. “Does that make sense to you?”

He nodded, taking a step forward. “You want a man to take your heart. What about your kisses? Do you want a man to ask for those, or just take them?” His eyes were on her lips, and she nervously stuck her tongue out to wet them.

“I think I’d rather get to know a man before any kisses are involved.” Even as the words escaped her lips, she knew they were a lie. When it came to Frank, she wanted nothing more than to be kissed. What on earth was wrong with her?

“Is that so?” Frank continued to stare at her lips, well aware that her eyes were on his as well.

She nodded. “Definitely. I’m not the type of girl who goes around just kissing anyone, you know. I do have morals.”

Frank caught her about the waist and pulled her to him, pressing his lips to hers. Morals or not, he had to kiss her. He carefully kept the kiss light, just a gentle brush of his lips against hers.

When he lifted his head, Evelyn put her hand to her stomach, her voice breathless. “I don’t think we should kiss again.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll be working for you. What will people think?”

He shrugged. “I stopped worrying about what people would think a long time ago. Now I worry about what matters to me. And that’s happiness. Everyone deserves some in their lives, don’t you think?”

“Well, yes, of course, but...”

“No buts! I think you’re a beautiful woman, and I wanted to kiss you. So I did.” He touched the brim of his cowboy hat. “Good day, Evelyn. I’ll see you at church tomorrow. Don’t forget the picnic.”

Evelyn stared at him as he rode away, her hand covering her heart. She’d wanted a man who would just take it from her. It appeared she found him. Now she just had to figure out what to do with him.

Chapter 4

Evelyn rose much earlier than usual on Sunday morning to make something suitable for a picnic. She didn't want to make fried chicken again, because she'd already made that for him, and she *could* make more than one meal. Instead, she put together some sandwiches made of leftovers from the night before and whipped up a potato salad and some cookies. It wasn't a gourmet meal, but she hoped they would enjoy it.

While she worked, she thought about the kiss of the day before. She wasn't certain why Frank had kissed her, but she had to tell him it was inappropriate. He was her boss, and she couldn't run around kissing him. It simply wasn't the right thing to do.

Of course, the way he made her feel with his kisses made her want to ignore propriety entirely and ask for more.

She had packed the food into a picnic hamper and cleaned up her mess in the kitchen before the others were up and around. She hurried upstairs so she could get ready for church.

She sat in the pew behind Edna Petunia and Cletus at church that day, the family taking up most of two rows as usual. Just before they began singing the hymns chosen for that morning by Evelyn's brother-in-law, their pastor, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Micah Barton had moved to Nowhere to be their pastor and in just a few months before, and had quickly married, Sarah Jane, another of the girls Edna Petunia had taken in.

Evelyn moved over closer to Penny, who sat to her right, to allow more people into the pew. She turned her head to smile a greeting, and her eyes met Frank Keifer's.

"Good morning," he whispered softly, picking up the hymnal.

She nodded briefly, lowering her eyes as she thought about the last time they'd been together. She could still feel his lips on hers. Would she ever tire of being close to the man beside her? She smiled a greeting at Daniel, forcing her thoughts on things other than matters of the heart. A church was not the right place to be flirting.

After the service, which Evelyn would later wonder about, she introduced Frank to Cletus. "It's nice to meet you, sir," Frank said properly.

Cletus's eyes traveled up and down the younger man. He nodded slowly. "Good to meet you, boy. What are your intentions toward my Evelyn?"

"Today, I intend to go on a picnic with her and my son. I have

made no plans beyond that,” Frank said honestly, hoping the man would appreciate his words. You never could tell.

Cletus nodded slowly. “I s’pose that’s a good enough answer. You’re bringing her home this evening?”

“Yessir. That was the plan.”

“I’m going to go check on my married girls now. Make sure their husbands are still treating them right.” Cletus walked away at that, leaving Frank worried. Would he be expected to marry Evelyn because of one brief kiss? He sure hoped not, because he wasn’t ready for that kind of commitment yet—he had to get to know her better first.

Evelyn introduced him to several of her sisters, including Penny and Gertie. Gertie smiled sweetly at him. “I can’t believe she’s going to work for you after the way she was spitting fire after your little discussion at the school on Friday.”

Frank looked at Evelyn in surprise. “Oh, she was, was she?”

“You knew I was. I’m sure you could see the steam trying to escape my ears at the time.” Evelyn refused to be embarrassed over true emotions. How could she not have been upset by him?

He grinned. “Yeah, I knew.” He looked at the door of the almost-empty church. “Are you ready?”

Evelyn nodded, taking the picnic basket from the floor where she’d set it before church began. “I’m ready. I think.”

He took the basket from her and allowed her to lead the way out the door. “Where’s Daniel?” she asked, looking around for the boy.

“Edna Petunia invited him to eat lunch with your family.” He looked at her with surprise. “You didn’t know?”

She shook her head. Obviously Edna Petunia was playing matchmaker again, and that was always frightening. “When did she talk to you about it?”

“She telephoned yesterday evening. Daniel liked the idea, so I said yes. Does that bother you?”

Evelyn shrugged. “It doesn’t bother me that he’s having lunch with them. It bothers me that she’s matchmaking. Edna Petunia is *not* a sweet old woman. She’s a manipulator, and she’ll do whatever it takes to get what she wants.”

Frank looked at her with surprise. “You make it sound like you don’t like her.”

“Oh, I love and admire her. I also have a good healthy fear of her, and you should develop one too. Our lives will be carefully manipulated otherwise.”

“She looks so sweet. I suppose that’s her disguise?”

“Yes! And she wears it so well, doesn’t she?” Evelyn shook her head. “I suggest we do our best to keep her from Daniel. She will try to use him to manipulate us together.”

"What if I'm ready to be manipulated?"

"You're not. Trust me. *No one* is ready to be manipulated by Edna Petunia."

"I defer to your judgment. You know her so much better than I do."

Evelyn nodded emphatically. "I surely do! Where are we going for the picnic?"

He shrugged. "I thought we'd head out to the hills. It's a beautiful day."

"Did you bring a quilt?" she asked, annoyed with herself for having forgotten. She'd been so emotional about spending time with him after their kiss of the day before, she was surprised she'd remembered her own bonnet.

"I didn't," he said with a frown. "I thought you would."

"I would have, but I forgot it. We can run by the house for it."

"All right." He helped her up into his wagon and set out toward the Sanders's house. "Did you bring anything I could snack on along the way? I'm starving!"

She had placed the basket between them on the seat, and dug through it, finding one of the cookies she'd carefully wrapped in a napkin. "Will this do?"

He plucked the cookie from her hand, taking a big bite. "That'll help." He looked at her. "This is good. I hope you'll be baking for Daniel and me starting tomorrow."

Evelyn nodded. "I was planning to. Daniel's so thin."

Frank sighed. "I'm not exactly a good cook. I try, but it's not something I've ever learned to do."

"I'm sure Edna Petunia will let him have an extra slice of pie. She's got a soft spot for young children—especially children who've lost a parent." She carefully avoided the word *bastard* after the way he'd reacted the night before, but she couldn't be certain Edna Petunia wouldn't use it.

She left him in the wagon alone while she ran into the house to fetch a quilt, hurrying back out while the family was distracted by their lunch. Climbing back into the wagon without his help, she clutched the quilt on her lap.

"I took another cookie while you were gone," he whispered as if confessing to some great crime.

She laughed. "Don't spoil your lunch!"

"I ate my own cooking for breakfast, so trust me, there's no danger of my lunch being spoiled." Frank glanced over at her. "Did you put the basket between us because you needed a barrier of some sort?"

She blushed. That was exactly why she'd put it between them. "It needed to go somewhere."

"The back of the wagon would have worked."

"But then I couldn't have gotten you a cookie," she countered.

"You could move it to the other side of you and scoot across the seat to me. That wouldn't hurt anything."

"I suppose not." When she didn't immediately follow his suggestion, he frowned.

"Are you nervous around me?"

She shrugged. "Maybe a little. You are my employer after all."

"Is me being your employer the problem? Or is it the fact that I kissed you yesterday?"

She blushed, not really wanting to discuss the kiss, but since he'd brought it up, she wasn't about to back down. She'd learned at a young age to never back down from a challenge. "Why did you kiss me?"

"All the usual reasons, I guess." No woman had ever asked him that before.

"And those are?" she asked softly.

"Because you're pretty, and I'm unattached. Because you seem to be a good woman. Because I wanted to."

"And do you always do whatever you want, Mr. Keifer?"

"We've kissed now. You have to call me Frank." He pulled the wagon off the road. "This looks like a good spot."

"You didn't answer my question...Frank."

"No, I don't suppose I did." He jumped down and walked around to help her to the ground, reaching for the picnic basket once she was on her feet.

"Are you going to?"

He shrugged. "Probably not." He carried the basket to the top of a small hill, then waited for her to spread the quilt. "You didn't seem to be objecting to my kiss yesterday."

Evelyn blushed at his words. "I'd just like to understand why it happened."

"I have no real reasons. Next time I want to kiss you, I'll write you an essay on all the reasons why. Will that suffice?"

"If you are willing to wait until I've read it before you actually kiss me, then yes, that might do."

She sat down on the quilt and opened the basket he'd placed in the center, quickly serving them both on the plates she'd packed. He took the plate she offered and nodded approvingly. "This all looks delicious."

"I assure you, it is."

He prayed for them before reaching for the sandwich and taking a bite. He said nothing before putting a forkful of the potato salad mountain she'd created into his mouth. "You're a good cook, Evelyn."

“Thank you,” she said, surprised at how pleased she was he liked her food. “I brought plenty, thinking Daniel would be here with us.”

“Would you feel more comfortable if he was?”

“Probably. I’m used to being around children, but I’m not used to being around unattached men by myself.”

“If I assure you my intentions are proper, would that help?”

Evelyn shrugged. “I don’t know if it would or not. I’d probably still feel more comfortable with Daniel around.” Wanting to change the subject, she looked around the spot he’d chosen, noticing a small creek about twenty yards away where the water cascaded over rocks. She knew at this time of year the creek would be much more active than usual.

When he finished eating, he set his plate on the ground, picking up her hand and holding it. “I don’t want to scare you off, but I do want you to know my intentions are honorable. I wouldn’t get Daniel all excited about me courting a woman if I wasn’t thinking of her as a possible wife.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that. You’re my employer and I barely know you.”

He sighed. “I’d like to ask you to consider giving me a chance. I’m not asking for your hand at this point. I’m not sure if I ever will. My first marriage was a happy one, and I’m not sure I’ll be ready to remarry anytime soon.” Of course, loving being married made him a bit eager to try it all again. The pleasures of the marriage bed made him desire another bride. Soon.

She finally nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

He moved their plates from between them and pulled her toward him on the quilt. Cupping her face in his hands, he gazed deeply into her eyes. “I want to kiss you again.”

Evelyn’s eyes dropped to his lips. “I—I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I do. I’ve thought of nothing else since our time together yesterday. I have a hard time believing our kiss was as good as I remembered.”

She frowned, remembering how soft his lips were. “I don’t think kissing is going to help us know how we feel for each other. It’s just a distraction.”

“And such a pleasant one.” He lowered his lips to hers, kissing her gently.

Evelyn liked his kisses a great deal more than she would care to admit. She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him, her lips moving against his.

Frank smiled, gathering her even closer. He wanted to kiss her forever.

After a moment Evelyn pulled away from him, moving her fingers to touch the lips that were still tingling from the touch of his. "If we're going to—to court, we're going to need to be discreet. I don't want to upset Daniel if things don't work out between us." She also didn't want to have a reputation for dating men and kissing them and then ending the relationship. That was a good way to get a bad reputation.

"Speaking of Daniel, do you have plans for your day tomorrow? Have you thought about what subjects you'll teach him?"

"I'll probably follow the same lesson plans as Miss Whitten. While he's doing quiet work, I'll do the household chores."

His thumb traced her cheek, his hand cupping the side of her head. "I'm so glad you're going to be working with me. It's been hard trying to raise Daniel alone." He smiled at her, his eyes twinkling. "Do you think you'll be teaching him full days? Or will he have time to help me in the afternoons?"

Evelyn gleaned a lot from his question. "Do you need him to be able to get the job done?"

Frank shook his head. "Not really, but I want him to know how to do the job when it's his turn. He needs to learn."

She knew most farming families felt the same way. Boys learned by working with their fathers, not by wasting time in a school room. "We could probably do everything he needs to do in the mornings, and I could have him with you in the afternoons. It would mean me not starting on the household chores until afternoon, but then I wouldn't have to break them up by stopping to teach. Yes, that's probably the best way to do it."

He leaned down and kissed her again, just a mere brush of his lips across hers. "Thank you."

"You're the boss."

"I'm glad someone finally realizes that."

Chapter 5

Evelyn woke earlier than usual on Monday morning, anxious to start her new job as tutor and housekeeper for the Keifers. She rushed as she dressed, refusing to eat breakfast. Instead she wanted to arrive early enough that she could fix breakfast for Frank and Daniel. She'd said she wouldn't be there until half past eight, but surely they'd be happy for the breakfast she'd fix.

She danced into the kitchen to kiss Edna Petunia's wrinkled cheek before rushing out the door to begin her first day of her new job. She knew in a week or two it would feel like drudgery, but the magic of the first day had filled her, and she was excited to be able to make a difference in the Keifers' lives.

She knocked on the front door when she arrived, knowing it was very early, but ranchers all got up early, or so she'd been told.

Frank came to the door, pulling his suspenders up over his shoulders. "Evelyn? Come in. We weren't expecting you for another two hours."

"I thought I'd come early and make breakfast for you."

Frank nodded abruptly. "I'm on my way out to milk the cow. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Evelyn wrinkled her nose at him as he left. He could have at least acted grateful that she'd made the effort of getting up early to feed him.

She sighed as she looked around the kitchen and the mess it was in. For people who didn't cook, they certainly always had a messy house. She hung her coat up on a hook on the wall before rolling her sleeves up and getting to work.

The stove had already been lit, so she heated water for dishes before scrambling eggs and sausage for them. She'd wanted to make biscuits and gravy as well, but he didn't seem to have any flour on hand, which was odd to her.

By the time Frank came in with a bucket full of milk and more than a dozen eggs, she had breakfast on the table. "I was going to make biscuits and gravy as well, but you seem to be out of flour. Do you want me to go to the mercantile today to pick some up?"

Frank shook his head. "No, that's fine. I need to go into town for a few things today anyway." He washed his hands in the sink before turning back to her. "You surprised me by coming so early. My plan was to have the kitchen cleaned before you got here."

Evelyn frowned. "Why? It's my job, isn't it?"

A slight smile touched his lips. "Yes, it is, but I didn't want you to think Daniel and I are slovenly pigs."

"Too late," she said with a wink, turning away to pour them each a cup of coffee. "Where's Daniel anyway?"

"He's mucking out the stalls. Should be back in the house in a minute." He approached her, gently stroking one hand up and down her arm. "Thank you for coming early to do something special for us. You're going to spoil us both."

Evelyn grinned at that. "By making you a good breakfast? How is that spoiling when cooking for you is my job?"

"I'm glad you're here to help out. I don't know what I would have done if you'd refused."

She smiled at that, looking up at him. His lips looked so soft to her, and she couldn't stop thinking about how they'd felt against hers. He leaned down, and just before their lips touched, the door burst open.

"Breakfast smells good! Are you going to fix us breakfast every morning, Miss Sanders? Pa can't cook to save his life."

Evelyn jumped away from Frank, blushing profusely. "He can't, huh?"

Daniel shook his head, his hair flopping as he did so. "No, ma'am. He's tried."

"At least he's never set the house on fire, though, right?"

Daniel made a face. "Well there was that one time..."

Frank put Daniel in a headlock, using his knuckles to rub on his head. "What was that?"

"Ow! Get off me, Pa!"

Evelyn ignored them both, putting the coffee on the table. She'd seen the older boys at the orphanage play that way with the younger boys a lot. "Breakfast is ready." She didn't wait for the men to go to the table, and instead, she started to serve herself.

The word breakfast seemed to work as magic on both of the males in the room, and they took their seats, happily serving themselves. Evelyn felt a pang, wishing she could cook as well as her sister Sarah Jane as she watched them eat, but neither of them had a single word of complaint.

She turned to Frank as they ate. "Will you stop by the house before you go to town so I can give you my grocery list? There are several things we need if you want me to be able to cook."

"Why don't you just come with me?" Frank asked softly. "We can plan to go right after lunch."

"Will you be home for lunch every day?" she asked with surprise in her voice.

He nodded. "Most days. I might make a sandwich every once in a while to eat while I'm out working, but I'm usually close enough to

the house that it's not a big deal for me to ride here and eat."

"All right. I'll make sure to keep that in mind. I'm not sure what there is to cook for lunch, but I'll find something." The house was mostly barren of supplies.

"If you can't find anything else, just make eggs and sausage again. We'll have the supplies you need in time for you to make supper."

She nodded. Cooking for the two of them was going to be a full time job in and of itself. Maybe she should renegotiate her wages...

He stood and headed for the door. "Get the schoolwork done this morning."

Evelyn got up and started to clear the table. "As soon as I have the table cleared, I'll start him on his first lesson."

Frank paused at the door for a moment, watching her. "I'll be here at noon."

She nodded, filling the basin once more. She didn't watch him leave, though she desperately wanted to. There was something about him made her want to just sit and watch him and everything he did for hours on end.

After she'd finished with the dishes, she wiped off the table and started Daniel working on his arithmetic. While he did that, she went to the bedrooms and stripped the beds, knowing the sheets wouldn't have been washed in much longer than she felt sheets should go between cleanings.

She did Daniel's room first, and felt vaguely uneasy when she went into Frank's room to get his dirty clothes and sheets. How odd it felt that she was in his bedroom without him. Of course, being in his bedroom with him would not—she blushed unable to even finish the thought. She tried to keep her mind blank as she finished gathering the laundry and took it into the kitchen.

"How's the arithmetic coming?" she asked, keeping her face averted.

Daniel groaned. "I hate arithmetic."

"I know. That's why we're doing it first, so you can do things you like later on."

"What's after arithmetic?" he asked, slumping in his chair grumpily.

"Geography. I'm going to try to alternate subjects you like with subjects you don't like." She knew that geography was something Daniel particularly liked.

"Fine." He kept writing away, his brow furrowed as he worked out the long division.

Evelyn didn't bother addressing his bad attitude as she pulled out the scrub board. "I'm going to be out front working on the laundry. Let me know when you're finished with arithmetic, and if you get

them all correct, we'll take a ten-minute recess before geography."

Daniel nodded as he kept going, watching his teacher struggling to get the laundry set up. "Do you do laundry at home?"

She shrugged. "I've done more laundry than I care to admit, but I haven't had the opportunity in the past few years. Edna Petunia tends to do things like that for us." She was hesitant to admit how privileged her life had become since moving to Texas, but it was the truth.

Wiping her hands on her apron, she picked up the first item of clothing to rub on the scrub board. Her dress was a fine muslin, and she didn't want to mess it up, so she wore her largest apron that completely covered her dress.

As she worked, she saw the rooster pecking at one of the hens in the small wired yard for them. She worried for a moment, but she remembered that it was normal behavior for the birds, so she didn't let herself think about it.

She was not even half finished with the laundry when Daniel called out to her that he'd finished his arithmetic. She dried her hands on her apron and went inside to sit at the table beside him, thankful for the quick break. She took the paper from him and read over what he'd done. "Your penmanship is getting much better, Daniel. This is good work."

After assigning him his geography to be completed after he took a short recess, she went back to the laundry, diligently scrubbing away at a stocking. As she scrubbed, she was glad that Daniel wasn't nearly as tall as his father yet, because it would make keeping track of which clothes belonged to whom much easier.

She wondered for a moment what to make for dinner, and decided on chicken and dumplings. It was relatively easy to make, and she was certain the men would enjoy it.

After she'd hung the wash on the line, she went back into the house to check on Daniel, who was working diligently. "Do you think we can be done by lunchtime?" he asked.

"That's my plan. I need to go into town to buy more food with your pa after lunch."

"Are you going to marry my pa?" he asked.

Evelyn shook her head, trying not to show how flustered she was. She removed her damp apron, and rubbed at the spot of water on her lavender dress. "Why would you ask that?"

Daniel shrugged. "Just sometimes he looks at you the same way he used to look at my mother."

"What was she like?" She didn't know why she was asking him that, because it was none of her business, but she desperately wanted to know. Every time she thought about their kiss she was wracked

with uncertainty. She hated not knowing what she was supposed to do about something, because she was used to being in charge.

Daniel shrugged. "She was a mother. She wore fancy dresses all the time, not like you're wearing, but like to wear to a ball. She liked to have parties in our house."

"Big parties?" she asked, surprised. Frank had seemed very down to earth to her, and he didn't seem the type to have big parties in his home at all.

Daniel nodded. "Men would wear suits and women would wear silk dresses. We had a huge ballroom that I was never allowed to play in. I liked it in there, because I could take my shoes off and slide across the floor in my sock feet. Mother said that was uncouth, and I shouldn't do it."

"And you left all that to come to Texas and ranch?"

He shrugged. "Pa always wanted to be a rancher, and he hated being a farmer. So after Mother died, he said that he needed to get away from the memories. So we came here. This house has no memories."

Evelyn assigned him his next task, a short essay on what it means to be an American citizen, before she took the broom into Frank's room and swept the floor. While she swept, she daydreamed about what it would be like to be married to a man like him. Would he be the romantic type? Always trying to sweep her off her feet? Or would he spend all of his time working, and act as if she was a distraction?

She sighed. She needed to stop thinking about her employer that way! She had a hunch it was easier said than done, though.

At eleven, she stopped to cook lunch, disappointed that she could make nothing special. She wasn't able to make elaborate meals anyway yet, but to have to do two meals of eggs in one day made her feel like she was inept.

When the door opened at lunchtime, she looked up and fought against the smile playing at her lips. What was it about him that made her want to grin from ear to ear?

Frank smiled at Evelyn, loving the way she looked standing at the stove in his kitchen. She had a smudge of dirt on one cheek, shouting out to him how hard she'd worked so far that day. He walked to her, and with a gentle fingertip, he brushed the dirt away. "I see you got the laundry done this morning. Thank you for that."

She blushed, feeling extremely awkward. "Was there something on my cheek?"

He nodded. "Just a smudge of dirt. You have obviously been working very hard today."

She shrugged. "Of course, I have. It's my job after all." She turned her head to one side, stretching her neck a bit. She was used to

working, but she wasn't used to the hard physical labor that was part of running a household. She had been in New York, but since their move to Texas, life had been decidedly easier.

Flustered, she reached up to pat her bun, only to find it completely mangled. She blushed, hating how disheveled she must look.

"You look beautiful," he said, reading her mind. "You've worked all day to keep my house and teach my son. How could you look less than beautiful to me?" He kept his voice soft as he spoke, worried that Daniel would hear. He didn't want to make his son furious with him, because he was starting to feel something for Evelyn. "How was school today?"

"It was good. I had no idea what a good writer Daniel is. He always refused to do his writing assignments for school."

Frank frowned at that. He'd had no idea Daniel had refused to do some assignments for school. His son had caused more problems for his teachers than he'd realized. He looked down at the woven rag rug on the floor in front of the basin. "I didn't handle that well at all, I know. I should have been more supportive of your problems with him in the schoolhouse."

She shook her head. "No, it's fine. I think he's going to thrive working here at home. He'll still be around others at church on Sundays and when he's working with you in the afternoons. This is the right solution for Daniel."

He nodded. "I just hate that it took so long to reach it."

Reaching across him, she grabbed three plates and piled them high with eggs and bacon. "I can't even bake bread today, so I'm very limited on what I can cook. I'll do my best to have a better meal for supper and from here on out."

"I'm not judging you by what you do around here. I'm thrilled to have you do anything."

She looked up on the shelf, her eyes obviously trying to find something. "Where's the salt?"

He pointed to the second shelf above the basin. "There. Right below the canister for the flour."

She spotted it and grabbed it, carrying it to the table. "Since I couldn't find it while I was cooking, we'll have to add salt to our own."

He was happy she'd said that. His wife had hated it when anyone had seasoned her food after she had. Of course, she'd rarely cooked. He shook his head, thinking about how idle his life had been. He liked working with his hands, but if his parents could see him, they'd be shocked.

After lunch, he ordered Daniel to clean up, while he went out to hitch up the wagon. Evelyn took the opportunity to slip into the

bathroom, thankful his house had the modern convenience. She had grown used to an easy life.

She quickly twisted her hair back up into the knot at the nape of her neck, and then she scrubbed her face clean. He'd wiped some of the dirt away, but it still practically covered her face.

When she finished she went outside to wait under a large cypress tree, waiting for him to drive the wagon there. As soon as he arrived, she jumped up without waiting for his help.

He glared at her. "You're supposed to wait for me to help you into the wagon."

She rolled her eyes. "It's not like I can't climb up myself. Do you really think Cletus helps all of us into a wagon before he drives somewhere?"

Despite his annoyance, Frank laughed at the picture she made in his head. He could just see the older man helping twelve girls, plus his wife into a wagon, before he was willing to drive anywhere. "You have a point."

"It's all about perception," she told him softly. "For me, growing up an orphan, I've never grown used to the social niceties some women take for granted. I'll let you help me up sometimes, but you need to let me help myself sometimes as well. Besides, I'm your employee, not your date for the church social."

"Speaking of that..."

"Speaking of what?"

"Church socials, of course."

"We weren't speaking of church socials. I was merely making a point."

"Well, then let's do." He started the team on the road to town.

"Let's do what?" The man made no sense whatsoever.

"Speak of church socials."

"Why would we want to do that?" she asked.

He sighed. "Evelyn, would you do me the honor of going to the church social with me on Friday night?"

Evelyn held her breath for a moment. "I don't know. What will people say?"

"Why would they say anything? And even if they do, why would we care?"

She shrugged. "I—I'm just an orphan, and probably a bastard. You know that, right? And I'm your employee. I don't know that you should be taking me to the church social."

"I don't care what anyone thinks, Evelyn. I want to take you to the social. I am beginning to care for you."

Evelyn took a deep breath, fighting her feelings. Would going with him be the right thing to do? She had no idea, but she had to find out.

She was starting to care for him as well, and wherever it took them, she had to explore it. "Yes, I'll go with you."

He looked at her with a big grin on his face. "You will? Really?"

She nodded. "You didn't think I'd say no, did you?"

He shrugged. "I've heard talk about you from my men."

She frowned at that. "What kind of talk?" Sometimes cowboys were worse than old women when it came to gossiping.

"Just that you turn down every man who asks you out."

"Is that why you asked? Because I'm some sort of challenge?"

He sighed. "Are you going to question my motives on everything I do? I asked you to the church social, because I want to be there with the prettiest girl in town on my arm, and because I care for you. If those aren't good enough reasons, you just let me know."

Evelyn smiled, shaking her head. "Of course those are good enough reasons, Frank. I'll go to the social with you. I'd be happy to."

Frank nodded, not looking over at her again. As often as she filled him with a feeling of hope for his future, she infuriated him. He didn't remember things being so difficult with Rebekah when they were courting. Of course, Rebekah had been as different from Evelyn as moonlight and the sun.

He'd figure Evelyn out, and when he did, he'd have the key to her heart. He was realizing a bit more every day just how ready he was to marry again. He only hoped Daniel was ready for him to remarry as well.

For now, he refused to think about it, knowing that dwelling on his future would only distort his perception of what would truly come. No, he'd be patient and kind, waiting for his sweet girl to fall for him.

Chapter 6

While they shopped, Evelyn thought about what she'd wear for the social on Friday. Frank hadn't known her long, so she could easily wear an old dress that he'd never seen, or she could beg Penny to make her a new dress. After a moment of contemplation, she popped over to her sister's work station at the back of the store.

"What are you doing here?" Penny asked. "I thought you were teaching Daniel today?"

Evelyn nodded, keeping her voice soft. "I am. I'm teaching him in the mornings, but I'm doing housework in the afternoons. I'm supposed to be cooking meals, but there was no flour or really any other food, except sausage and eggs. I made that for breakfast and lunch, but I need some real ingredients for supper, so Frank drove me into town." She shook her head. "That's not what I want to talk to you about though. How busy are you this week?"

Penny tilted her head to one side. "I've got the orders that have been paid for made up, and I'm just working on building up some stock right now. Why?"

"Frank asked me to the church social."

"You want a new dress before Friday? Are you kidding me?" Penny looked exasperated. "What's wrong with the dresses you have?"

"Please? I know you can do it, Penny. There's no seamstress like you in all of Texas."

"Oh, don't even try to butter me up." Penny sighed. "Of course, I'll do it, but you're going to owe me."

Evelyn flew around to the back of the table her sister sat behind and hugged her tightly. "Thank you!"

"What kind of dress do you want?" Although Penny rarely had the opportunity to make dresses, she preferred them to men's work shirts, so she kept a small book of sketches she'd made of dresses.

Evelyn picked up the book and flipped through it quickly. She was supposed to be shopping for food, not for a new dress. She found one she liked with a straight skirt and a blouse that wasn't quite low enough to show cleavage, but was low enough that it would feel a bit scandalous for Evelyn. "I like this one. Do you think Cletus will let me out of the house in that?" She studied it carefully, knowing it wasn't truly an immodest dress, but also knowing Cletus might see it as such. He wanted his daughters to always be covered. Preferably from the top of their heads to the tips of their toes.

Penny grinned as she looked at it. "I drew that with you in mind.

It'll be perfect! You'll wear a shawl until you leave."

"That's brilliant! Okay, I have to get to work shopping for the food we need."

"What about fabric?" Penny asked.

"Surprise me!" Evelyn trusted Penny's taste better than her own. Her sister had proven time and again that she was infallible when it came to picking out clothing.

"Okay. Fitting Wednesday night."

Evelyn nodded and waved as she rushed through the store picking out the things she'd need to cook with.

Just as she was finishing up, Frank came into the store. "I went to the butcher. I got some pork, chicken, and some beef."

"Sounds good. I can do a lot with those, now that I have actual food to cook." She'd bought potatoes and canned goods as well as staples like sugar, flour, and butter.

He carried her boxes of items to the wagon while she spent a moment talking to her brother-in-law. "How are the kids?" she asked.

"Fine, and Ruby is fine too, before you ask."

Evelyn grinned. "I miss Ruby."

"You saw her at church just yesterday. You quit your complaining, Evelyn."

She laughed. "Give her my love."

"I will. Now go on and get back to work. I can see Frank out there, looking plenty impatient."

"I'm not scared of him," she whispered, shocking her brother-in-law.

"Well, maybe you should be!"

She laughed, hurrying out the door with a wave over her shoulder. When she reached the wagon, Frank took her hand and helped her up. "You do know he's married, right?"

"Who's married?" Evelyn asked, confused.

"Lewis. You know, the man who owns the mercantile."

"Yes, I know he's married." She couldn't figure out why he'd tell her that.

"Then why were you flirting with him?"

She stared at him, momentarily taken aback. "Flirting? How was I flirting?"

"I saw you lean forward and whisper to him. That's flirting."

She sighed. "You know he's married to one of my sisters, right? Ruby."

"What? No, I had no idea." He took the reins and started navigating the rig through the light traffic of Nowhere. "Now I feel like a heel."

"For what?"

“For assuming you were flirting with him.” He shook his head. “I just saw you being so friendly with him and I saw red. You’re only supposed to be that friendly with me.”

“Well, technically, I shouldn’t be as friendly with you as I am with my brother.”

“Oh, I totally agree now that I understand the situation. And that’s why I feel like a heel.”

She shrugged. “I’m not bothered by it.” And surprisingly, she wasn’t. If he’d continued to be upset with her over it, she’d have been bothered a great deal, but when he’d backed off as soon as she explained the situation, she was thrilled.

“What are your plans for the afternoon?” he asked.

She looked at the sun, trying to judge the time. “I’ll make dinner, of course, and I need to get the wash in off the line, fold the clothes, remake the beds. If I have time, I’ll bake some fresh bread, but that may have to wait until morning.”

“I can understand that. I’m really happy with everything you’ve done so far today. The house is already looking better.”

She smiled at that. It was so nice to be appreciated for her hard work. “And we made it through a good day’s worth of lessons this morning. It worked well for me to do the laundry and some housework while giving him his assignments. Daniel does very well working independently.”

“Glad to hear it. Sometimes I wonder if anything he does is right.”

She shook her head. “Don’t be disappointed in him. He’s a good boy.”

Frank looked at Evelyn. “Do you really think so? I thought you probably hated him for the trouble he gave you at the schoolhouse.”

“I would never hate a boy for that. He just didn’t do well with the whole group of kids for whatever reason. I think the girls were much too distracting for him.”

“That doesn’t bode well for the future, does it? Imagine when he’s sixteen and has a girlfriend.”

“I don’t even want to!” Evelyn said with a laugh. “That boy is going to have every father in the whole county locking up his daughters.”

Frank laughed. “That part scares me a lot. Maybe I should just chain him to the wall in my barn until he’s twenty-five or so. Save all the other fathers some trouble.”

“I’m not sure if that’s the solution...but it may be something you want to offer to the other fathers for a small fee...”

He shook his head. “The way your mind works scares me just a bit.”

“Only a bit? I guess I’m not trying hard enough...”

He pulled into the yard in front of the house. "I'll carry all this inside. Do you mind putting it away?"

She shook her head. "Would you have a problem if I rearranged your kitchen so it made sense to me?" She'd had a hard time finding anything when it came to cooking. It would be so much easier if she set things up her own way.

"That'd be fine if that's what you want to do." He didn't care. As long as he didn't have to cook, he would be content with just about anything she did.

She hurried into the house, making sure the lunch dishes were done up. Everything was neat, and Daniel had obviously gone off to help on the ranch, which suited her just fine. She'd take the time to rearrange the kitchen while she cooked supper for them.

Frank carried the boxes into the kitchen and set them on the table. "I'm going to head back out to help the men. What time is supper?"

"Does six work?" she asked, glancing at a clock and seeing it was already three in the afternoon.

"Yeah, that's fine. You are going to stay and eat with us, aren't you?"

She looked at him for a moment, startled. "I can if you want. I figured I'd eat supper with my family, but I'm fine either way."

"Stay here with us, at least tonight. We'll see how it works for us." He glanced around, as if to make sure Daniel wasn't near, before pulling her up against him. "I want to spend time with you, and mealtimes seem to be the only time our paths are crossing."

She stared at his lips for a moment, worrying her own bottom lip with her teeth. He shook his head. "Don't bite your lip that way!"

She frowned, her gaze moving from his lips to his eyes. "Why not?"

"Because it's my job." He leaned down and captured her lips with his, biting the bottom one softly.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on for dear life. She hadn't realized she'd been waiting for this moment all day. She missed being held by him, and it had only been twenty-four hours since he'd kissed her last.

When he lifted his head, he smiled. "You're getting awfully good at this kissing business, Miss Sanders. I'm not sure that's good for me." With that, he turned and left the house, plopping his hat on his head along the way.

She leaned back against the counter, her chest rising and falling with her rapid breathing. She could get used to being kissed that way. It wouldn't be good for her, she feared, but she could certainly get used to it.

Shaking her head, she got to work, putting the perishables into the

ice box, and getting to work putting everything where she wanted it.

Once she was finished, she started the chicken boiling while she brought in the laundry from the clothesline. She was pleased with the progress she'd made on the house in such a short time. Why, it looked better and smelled good.

The beds were made, and the dirty clothes were put away. She wouldn't have time to bake bread that day, but she would the next. She still needed to wash down the walls and scrub all the floors, but she was certain she could be caught up on the household chores by Friday. Then it was only a matter of maintaining it all.

She sighed contentedly as she looked around. She felt as proud as if it was her own house. Putting her fingers to her lips, she could still feel his kiss. Maybe someday, it would be her house.

Chapter 7

When Evelyn got home that evening, Edna Petunia asked her to join Cletus and herself in the formal parlor. The older couple spent most evenings in the parlor at the back of the house, while leaving the informal parlor at the front for the girls. The girls all knew they were allowed to join their parents, but they preferred to give them time alone when they could. They all knew it hadn't been easy for them to adopt fifteen orphan girls just a few months after they married.

When Evelyn stepped into the parlor, her eyes went back and forth between Cletus and Edna Petunia. "Did I do something wrong?" The girls secretly joked about how they only got called into the parlor when they were in trouble. Evelyn knew it wasn't true, but she'd never been called back there, so she was a bit nervous anyway.

Edna Petunia patted the spot on the sofa beside her. "Close the door and sit down. We just want to talk to you for a few minutes."

Evelyn closed the door before joining Edna Petunia on the sofa. "What's going on?"

Cletus looked at Evelyn, a serious look on his face. "I hear you're going to the church social with Frank Keifer on Friday. What do you know about the man?"

Evelyn sighed. "Not a lot. I know he has a son named Daniel, who was the bane of my existence when I was the teacher's assistant in town. I know his wife died a year ago. I know he came from Georgia, I think he said. Daniel was telling me about the parties they used to hold at their home there, so I get the impression he left a very wealthy lifestyle to come here and be a rancher."

Cletus nodded, rubbing his chin. "I don't know how I feel about you seeing him."

She made a face. "You never complained about the others. Why Frank?"

"Because he hasn't come to me to declare his intentions yet. I want him to tell me what he's doing. Is he just wanting a woman on his arm to pass the time? Or does he have a real courtship on his mind?"

"I really don't know," she answered honestly. "I haven't asked, and he hasn't offered the information."

Edna Petunia put her hand on Evelyn's arm. "Why don't you invite the two of them over for supper tomorrow night, so we can get to know them better?"

Evelyn didn't see that she had a choice. "I'll invite them."

Cletus nodded. "And remember what I told you about Edna

Petunia needing a wedding to plan. I don't want to hear that the two of you ran off to town and got married. I know Micah would be willing to perform the ceremony, but we need time to make you a nice dress and get all your sisters bridesmaid dresses."

Evelyn's eyes widened. If she was expected to have all fourteen of her sisters in her wedding, that guaranteed that she would elope. Why would anyone want that many people in their wedding? "That's a lot of bridesmaids."

Edna Petunia smiled. "Are you already thinking about your wedding?"

Evelyn shook her head emphatically. "Not at all. I never planned on a large wedding. I was raised in an orphanage. Orphans elope. It's just what they do." Besides, to her, eloping sounded so much more romantic than planning out every single detail of a wedding.

Edna Petunia frowned. "So you're telling me it's my own fault none of you girls will let me plan a big wedding? Because I chose to have a houseful of bastard girls?"

Evelyn groaned softly. "No, that's not what I'm saying at all. Maybe one of the younger girls will want a big wedding with all the trimmings, but it's not something I've ever wanted."

Edna folded her arms across her chest, glaring at Evelyn. "You do want a big wedding. I can see it on your face every time we discuss weddings."

Evelyn knew what Edna Petunia was about. She was trying to convince Evelyn that she wanted what Edna wanted her to have. It wasn't going to work, though. "No, ma'am. I want nothing of the kind and never have. Besides, I don't think Frank Keifer is going to ask me to marry him. He's been married to a beautiful debutante. Why would he want an orphan girl?"

Cletus frowned. "You're not an orphan any longer. We adopted you."

"Yes, sir, I know you did. But I was an orphan for seventeen years. It's hard to lose that stigma."

Edna Petunia frowned at Evelyn. "What do you know about your real parents?"

Evelyn shrugged. "Honestly, I'm a very likely candidate for being a real bastard. I have no idea where I come from. I was left on the orphanage's doorstep when I was just three. No one ever claimed me or really wanted anything to do with me."

"Oh, I know that can't be true. You're a beautiful girl, so I'm certain you were a very pretty baby."

"What does being pretty have to do with anything?" Evelyn asked, confused. "Either a child is wanted or not. I obviously wasn't."

"There was no note of any sort pinned to you when you were

dropped off?" Edna Petunia asked.

Evelyn could see the older woman wanted her to have some sort of romantic back story that would tell about parents who had wanted to keep her, but had lost all their earthly possessions in a fire, or some such thing. She was sorry she couldn't tell her that story.

"There was nothing at all. Who I am is a mystery to everyone who was involved."

"Well, I know who you are," Edna Petunia protested. "You're Evelyn Sanders, a bright, caring girl who has so much love to give. The Keifers would be very lucky to have you in their family."

Evelyn shrugged, looking down at her hands. She didn't want her parents to have any idea how much that was what she really wanted.

Cletus sighed. "Well, you invite them to supper tomorrow, and I'll chat with Frank. We'll see what his intentions are."

"Don't scare him, Cletus. No one deserves that."

"Scare him? Me?" He gave her a wounded look. "Why do you think I'd do that?"

Evelyn frowned. "You were intimidating enough when you were simply the richest man in town. Now that you're running for judge, all the men are afraid of you. It's not good!"

Cletus grinned so wide, it was almost eerie. "Good. I want to intimidate every man who even looks at my girls. They all need to know not to mess with your emotions. Or your bodies. He hasn't tried to kiss you, has he?"

Edna Petunia shook her head. "Hmph. I told you I saw him kiss her on Saturday when he dropped her off. Do you ever listen to me, you old buzzard?"

"You must have said it when I was so busy thinking about how beautiful you are that I couldn't concentrate on your words."

"Blind old fool!"

When they started talking that way, Evelyn knew they wouldn't stop, so she got up and left the room. She was not looking forward to having Frank and Daniel over for supper. She could tell Cletus was going to make it hard on her.



* * *

The following morning, Evelyn made the breakfast she'd wanted to make on Monday. She arrived early and made biscuits, sausage gravy, eggs, and sausage. When Frank came into the house from milking the

cov, he inhaled deeply. "Oh, that smells wonderful."

"Cletus says this should be the breakfast everyone eats every day. I never had it before I moved to Texas," she said. He walked up behind her and kissed the side of her neck, causing her to shiver. "Cletus and Edna Petunia have requested the presence of your family at our house for supper this evening."

Frank froze, backing up a bit. "Do we have a choice in the matter?"

She shook her head. "Not if you want to take me to the church social on Friday night. Cletus wants to get to know you better before you spend any more time alone with me than you already have."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "So I have to go?"

"Yes, you do. I'm sorry."

He sighed. "I'll go. Tell me about him first, though. I know he has a lot of money, but where did it come from?"

Evelyn shrugged. "The story I know is that he was a banker before the War Between the States. When the war started, he enlisted to fight on the side of the Confederacy. When he came home, his parents had died. He refused to live in the big house he'd inherited, and chose to be a hermit living in the woods until just a few years ago. When he met Edna Petunia."

"Are you kidding?"

She shook her head. "No, and he didn't tell Edna Petunia about his money until after the wedding. His hair and beard were long and unkempt and he was terribly dirty. When he showed up at the church to marry her, she didn't recognize him, because he'd cleaned up."

"Wow. And he moved her into his childhood home?"

"Yes, and we all live there now. I'm sure there's more to the story, but I try not to ask. I'm afraid there will be a long drawn out conversation involving pickles and petunias and peppermint sticks. All the P words in the same conversation! No, I'm not asking a thing."

Frank had no idea what she was talking about, but he chalked it up to the strange air of mystery that seemed to surround Edna Petunia Sanders. "That sounds interesting. I'll drive you home this evening then, so we can join your family for supper."

"Thank you for accommodating them."

"I don't really feel like I have a choice."

She shrugged. "Don't be intimidated by them. They love me, and that's the only reason they're insisting on it."

"Well, hopefully they'll love Daniel and me as well then."

Evelyn served up the last of the eggs that she had just finished, before walking to him and wrapping her arms around his waist. "How could anyone not love you two?"

Frank was startled by her. She'd never made any advances toward

him before. "If they hate me, will you still go to the church social with me?"

Evelyn laughed. "Of course, I will. Cletus doesn't hate anyone." She frowned. "Well, if you were to get me pregnant, and then abandon me, he would hate you. But you won't do that, because I won't let you do that."

He leaned down and softly kissed her, jumping away when he heard the door open. "Oh, Pa, it's not like I don't know you want to kiss Miss Sanders. You don't have to hide it from me," Daniel announced as he walked to the basin to wash his hands.

Frank grinned. "Well, do you want me to kiss her in front of you, so you can take notes on kissing technique?"

Evelyn's eyes widened at their exchange, and she quickly turned to get their plates, simply to hide her flaming face. "I hope you're both hungry."

Father and son both burst into laughter. "I don't think she wants to be part of your kissing lesson, son."

"I'll never understand women," Daniel said with an air of superiority. "They love to kiss us men, but they won't admit it. What's that about?"

Frank gave a long suffering sigh. "I'll never understand them either, I don't guess."

Evelyn ignored them both as she put the plates on the table, pouring coffee for her and Frank and a glass of milk for Daniel. "I hope you like biscuits and gravy," she said to the room at large, not willing to look at either of them.

Frank shrugged. "Biscuits and gravy are my second favorite thing in the morning."

"Coffee's your favorite?" she asked, her eyes finally meeting his, since he'd gotten off the subject of kissing.

"Oh, no ma'am. Kissing is my favorite morning thing. Want me to show you?"

Her cheeks were flaming as she sat down at the table and picked up her fork. "I'm going to bake bread today."

Daniel sat down at the table. "I guess she doesn't want to keep talking about kissing, Pa. You should work with her on that."

"On kissing? You know I've already been working with her on that."

"Enough!" Evelyn said, taking a sip of her coffee. "If you don't behave, I'll stop coming early to make you breakfast and just leave you to fend for yourselves. My cooking the morning meal was not part of our arrangement if you'll recall."

Frank grinned at her but stayed silent.

Daniel sighed. "We'll stop. We like it when you cook breakfast for

us.” He took a big bite of his biscuits and gravy. “You’re a good cook, Miss Sanders.”

“After you eat something cooked by Edna Petunia, you’ll change your mind. She’s an amazing cook, and so is my sister Sarah Jane.”

“Sarah Jane is the one who married the preacher, right?” Frank asked.

Evelyn nodded. “She was meant to marry a preacher.”

“You think?” He’d never even tried to imagine what kind of girl would want to marry a preacher. “Why?”

“Well, she’s always been very serious about church and faith. When she was younger, she was taken in by a preacher and his wife, and she’d been a bit overbearing about religious things ever since.”

“Sounds like she wasn’t all that pleasant.”

Evelyn shrugged. “She wasn’t my favorite, but now that she’s married, she’s mellowed out a lot. I love her dearly. And her little girl, Chrissy, is as sweet as can be.”

“How long has she been married?”

“About three months.”

“And she has a little girl? Where did she come from?”

“Sarah Jane volunteered at the orphanage in town, and a little girl moved here. She ended up marrying Micah, and they adopted her.”

“Is that why they married?” Frank hadn’t heard anything about the preacher in town marrying just to adopt a child, but maybe the rumors simply hadn’t reached him.

“You know, I’m not sure. I think they would have married if not for Chrissy, but they certainly married faster because of her. They both met her and wanted her immediately.”

“Has it worked out well for them?”

Evelyn nodded. “Sarah Jane makes a wonderful preacher’s wife, and she loves Micah. Chrissy seems to be settling in well. I think they did the right thing for all three of them.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Actually, all three of my sisters who have married are raising children who aren’t their own. Opal and Ruby’s husbands both came with children from prior marriages.”

Maybe her parents wouldn’t count Daniel against him. “How does Edna Petunia feel about all the extra grandchildren?”

“Well, she wishes they were all bastards, of course, but she’s happy to get children any way she can.” Evelyn grinned at Frank.

“I need to spend more time with this woman. She sounds very interesting.”

“Oh, trust me. There’s no one in the whole state of Texas who is more interesting than Edna Petunia.”

Chapter 8

Frank was surprised at how nervous he was as he drove Evelyn home that evening. He was thrilled with their arrangement, because Evelyn treated his home as she would her own. She was scrubbing down walls and baking bread and cake. He couldn't believe how lucky he was to get such a hard-working housekeeper out of his son's bad behavior.

Daniel chose to ride in the back of the wagon instead of up front with Frank and Evelyn. When they reached the Sanders's house, he jumped down, and ran up to the door, pounding on it. Katie, who was only a couple of years Daniel's senior opened it. "Edna Petunia, our guests are here!" she called out.

Frank helped Evelyn down, and the two of them walked toward the house together. She went to the kitchen first. "Do you need any help with supper, Edna Petunia?"

"Not at all. Take your man in to talk to Cletus. He's been in the formal parlor mumbling to himself all day, so I'm sure he's worked up a lot of questions to ask him."

Frank sighed, straightening the tie he'd put on after coming in at the end of his long day. "It's good to see you, Edna Petunia." He handed her a bouquet of flowers he'd had Daniel pick on their way back to the house that afternoon.

Edna Petunia smiled. "I'll put them in a vase."

Evelyn smiled at Frank. "Right this way." She led him to the back to the house and into the parlor. "Cletus, Frank Keifer is here to talk to you."

Cletus looked up from the law book he was reading. "Have a seat, Frank. Evelyn, you may run along."

Evelyn looked back and forth between the two men, before backing out of the room and closing the door.

Cletus gave Frank a long look, studying him as if he was a specimen under a microscope. "What are your intentions toward my Evelyn?"

Frank leaned forward with his forearms resting on his knees. "I think Evelyn is a very special girl. She's the first woman I've asked to step out with me since my wife died."

Cletus nodded. "You're right about that. Each of my girls is special in her own way, but Evelyn really is a sweet, confident woman. What are your intentions?"

Frank sighed. He'd hoped he could avoid the direct question. "I

really don't know just yet," he said honestly. "I'm taking her to the church social on Friday, as you know, but I don't know beyond that. She seems like the kind of woman I'd like to spend the rest of my life with, but I need to get to know her a bit better first."

"I don't want you kissing on her until you know what your intentions are."

Frank flushed at that. He didn't think he needed to adhere to the older man's morals when they were so old-fashioned. "Are you saying you didn't kiss Edna Petunia until you married her?"

Cletus laughed. "I didn't kiss Edna Petunia until I knew I wanted to marry her, but I saw her and knew that in the first moment. I followed the old woman around town like a lost puppy dog, until she got so mad at me she tracked me down and demanded to know what my problem was."

Frank choked back a laugh. "I see."

"Oh, go ahead and laugh boy. Edna Petunia is a pretty special lady, all right. Why, when God made her, he threw out the mold. She's perfect in every way."

"I don't plan to dishonor Evelyn," Frank told him. "I plan to figure out if she's right for me, and once I know that, I'll make plans from there."

"You can't elope."

"I beg your pardon?" Frank was getting confused at the rapid change of subject.

"Edna Petunia wants at least one of the girls to have a long engagement, so she can plan the perfect wedding. I think you and Evelyn need to plan that long engagement."

"How long were you engaged to Edna Petunia?"

"Oh, at least a day or two," Cletus responded. "But we're not talking about Edna Petunia and me. We're talking about you and Evelyn. Edna Petunia wants a long engagement, so you get to give it to her."

Frank sighed. "Really, if I decide I'm ready to marry her, I don't see myself waiting a long time." He shook his head. "Do you have any idea how beautiful your daughter is?"

"All of my girls are beautiful—just like their mother."

Frank smiled at that. Beauty truly was in the eye of the beholder if Cletus saw that old woman as beautiful.

He was seated beside Evelyn at supper, and she kept looking at him out of the corner of her eye as if she was trying to figure out what he and Cletus had discussed. He gave her a slight shake of his head to tell her not to worry about it.

Evelyn sat quietly at the table, eating the pot roast Edna Petunia had prepared with Martha's help. Daniel sat between her two

youngest sisters, reminding her of a peacock preening his feathers. The boy really did need to be taken in hand.

“Hattie, would you mind passing me the salt?” Daniel asked, his eyes on the girl beside him.

Hattie handed him the salt without a word. Her eyes met Evelyn’s though, and she rolled them at her.

Evelyn bit her lip. Daniel was three years younger than Hattie and Katie, and he didn’t seem to care.

After supper, Evelyn walked out to the wagon to say goodnight to Frank and Daniel. “I’ll see you both in the morning.”

“Are you going to cook us breakfast again?” Daniel asked. “Please, Miss Sanders? I promise we won’t talk about kissing.”

Evelyn nodded. “I’ll come early and fix breakfast again. You’d better be happy that I’m so forgiving.”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. I’m very happy.” Daniel climbed into the front of the wagon, ready to go home.

Frank smiled at Evelyn, squeezing her hand. “He just wanted to know my intentions,” he whispered softly. “He cares about you a great deal.”

Evelyn wanted to ask him what he’d told Cletus about his intentions, but she knew doing so would be improper. She already loved him, and she didn’t want to do anything that would scare him away.

He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Evelyn fairly floated up the stairs as she went to ready herself for bed. There was just something about Frank Keifer’s kisses that made her happy. More happy than she’d ever dreamed she could be.



* * *

The rest of the week zipped by, and Evelyn was surprised when it was already Friday afternoon. She’d made arrangements with Frank to leave an hour early so she could get ready for the church social.

Penny had chosen a silk in a very soft pink for Evelyn’s dress, and Evelyn pulled it over her head with a sigh. She’d never worn silk, and wouldn’t have chosen it for herself, but it felt so soft against her skin, and when she peered at herself in the looking glass atop her dresser, she sighed contentedly. She knew she’d never looked as good as she did at that moment.

Turning to Penny, who had helped her dress, she ran to her sister and hugged her. "Thank you. It's beautiful!"

Penny smiled. "You look just as I imagined you would!"

"How much do I owe you for it?" Evelyn turned this way and that to see each angle of the beautiful dress.

"Oh, Edna Petunia took care of it. She said you'd taken a cut in pay, and she wasn't about to let you spend a month's salary on a new dress."

Evelyn sighed. She wasn't surprised by her new mother's generosity, but she did feel a twinge of guilt over it. "Are you sure? I was planning on paying for it. I have money saved."

"Edna Petunia wouldn't hear of it. You know how she gets."

"I do." Evelyn sat down in the chair in front of her dresser. "Would you help me with my hair?"

"Of course!"

"Are you planning to go to the social tonight?" Evelyn asked, suddenly worried she was keeping Penny from getting ready herself.

"Not this one. I wasn't asked by anyone I cared to go with."

Penny was very pretty, but she was also very picky. She hadn't yet found a man in town she found worth the effort it took to dress and fix her hair to go to a dance. "Well, I appreciate your help."

"Do you think you're going to marry Mr. Keifer?" Penny asked as she carefully brushed out Evelyn's hair in preparation for putting it up.

Evelyn blushed. "Really, this is the first thing we've attended together. We went on a picnic on Sunday, but for the most part, we barely know each other." She thought about the kisses they'd shared throughout the week, and felt guilty. She shouldn't deceive her sister, but she also didn't want to admit that she and Frank had taken to kissing each other any time they were alone for a few minutes. What kind of example would that set for her younger sister?

"Tell me about his kisses," Penny insisted.

Evelyn shook her head. "What makes you think he's kissed me?"

"Edna Petunia saw you kissing on Saturday when he dropped you off. She told Cletus, loudly, so the whole house knows."

Evelyn chuckled softly. "Why does this not surprise me?"

"Because you've lived in this house for four years. You know as well as I do that there are no secrets here."

"Of course, there aren't." Evelyn sighed. "His kisses...I don't even know what to say to that. When he kisses me, all coherent thoughts leave my head. It's like he reduces me to something that has no ability to think or feel anything for herself. I love him."

"Of course you do," Penny said as if it was common knowledge. "I know you, and you wouldn't be allowing a man to kiss you in full

view of the house if you didn't."

"So if I didn't love a man, I'd kiss him in the woods?" Evelyn asked, a grin on her face.

"Well, I didn't say that, but you sure wouldn't risk any of us seeing you kiss him." Penny shrugged. "I'm glad he's good to you."

"He is." Evelyn talked about what she'd learned from Daniel about Frank's first wife. "I feel quite lacking when compared with someone like that."

"Obviously Frank doesn't think so, or he wouldn't be kissing you or taking you to the church social. He wouldn't be getting Daniel's hopes up about a potential marriage between you."

"Does Daniel have his hopes up?" Evelyn asked, surprised. Daniel seemed to take everything in stride, but he didn't seem to want to anything to happen between them.

"He told Katie and Hattie that they were too pretty for him to call either of them 'aunt' but he'd be happy to get to spend more time with them."

Evelyn laughed. "That boy is so interested in girls. I told Frank we were going to have to chain him to the wall in the barn."

Penny laughed. "He'll make some girl a fine husband someday. Just not for several more years. How old is he? Thirteen?"

"Yes. I think that was his biggest problem in school as well. He wanted to kiss all the girls, and if they didn't want to kiss him back, he played pranks on them."

"Well, I for one am glad he caused so many problems. It forced you to get to know his father better."

"Yeah, but is that good for me?"

"It sure seems to be!" Penny tucked the last pin into Evelyn's coiffure, before she grew serious. "Abner told everyone he was going to take you to the social tonight."

"What? I hope you told him I'm going with a real man and not a boy like him." Evelyn wrinkled her nose. Abner was a pain in the behind, and she was sick of his games.

Penny laughed. "No, I didn't tell him that, but maybe I should have. I told him you were going with someone else, and he said that you wouldn't leave with whomever it was."

Evelyn groaned. "How does he think he's going to get me to not leave with the man escorting me? Is he insane?"

"You know he is. I don't know why he's fixating on you this week. He took Eliza and Sally both out this week, but for the last couple of days, he's spoken of no one but you. Have you seen him at all?"

"No, now that I'm not in town every day, I don't see anyone but family. I don't think I saw him when I was in town on Monday for supplies either. Of course, I was concentrating on the man I was with,

and that was not Abner.”

“Well, do the same tonight, and maybe he’ll get the hint and leave you alone from now on.”

Evelyn got to her feet and took one last peek in the mirror. “Thank you for all your help tonight, Penny.”

Penny smiled. “You should make sure to stop and speak with Edna Petunia and Cletus on your way out.”

“Of course, I will.” Evelyn picked up her small handbag and clutched it in one hand. Cletus said his girls were never to leave the house without a few dollars to their name. That way if something happened on the date, they’d be able to pay for a way home.

She walked to the parlor and found them sitting there together, on the sofa, holding hands. “I’m ready to go.”

Cletus looked her up and down, eyeing the shawl she had draped around her shoulders. “If you’re wearing that to hide the fact that your dress is cut too low, don’t bother. I’m not blind, you know.”

“My dress isn’t too low,” Evelyn said, pulling the shawl away from the front of her dress for him to see. “No cleavage showing at all.”

Cletus grumbled. “There’d better not be. You are not to show your bosoms to any man until you’ve been married for at least five years.”

Evelyn laughed, watching Edna Petunia as she got to her feet. The older woman draped a pearl necklace around her throat and fastened it for her. “There. Now you look perfect.”

Evelyn smiled, reaching out to hug her mother. “Thank you. I feel like a princess.”

“You look like one too.” Edna Petunia had tears in her eyes. “Go and have a wonderful time! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Cletus snorted at that. “Edna Petunia, there’s little you won’t do, so I don’t think that’s an admonition you should be giving our girls.”

“Oh, hush up, you old goat.”

Evelyn shook her head, walking away to answer the front door. They were starting to use their own special endearments with each other again, which meant it was time for her to go.

Chapter 9

Frank stood at the door waiting for her, wearing a black suit with his black cowboy hat. Evelyn stared at him for a moment, never having seen him dress so nicely. “Hi.”

Frank smiled. “Hi. Are you ready?”

Evelyn nodded, suddenly feeling out of her element. What was she doing going to a dance with a man ten years older than she was? Had she lost her mind? And more importantly, how on earth had she fallen in love with him? She sighed. He looked wonderful.

He offered her his arm, and she called out, “We’re leaving, Edna Petunia. I’ll be back before it’s too late!”

“Don’t have too much fun!” came the response from across the house.

Evelyn grinned. She could always count on Edna Petunia to say something ridiculous when she needed it most. Turning back to Frank she said, “I need to get the dish I made for the potluck.” She hurried into the kitchen and came back with a basket over one arm. “Is Daniel in the wagon?”

Frank shook his head. “I left him with one of his school friends this evening.”

“Oh?”

“I wanted it to be just the two of us.”

Evelyn swallowed hard at that. “Sounds nice.” And it did. Oh, did it ever. She hadn’t felt so much for a man in her entire life, and this one was making her feel like she was someone special. Something that had never really happened for her. Oh, Cassie Hayes, the matron of the orphanage where she’d grown up had tried, but there had been over thirty orphans living under one roof. How could she make just one feel special?

Cletus and Edna Petunia tried to make all the girls feel special, but again, all of them couldn’t be special, at least not in Evelyn’s mind. So to be a favorite of this handsome man made her feel extraordinary.

“Are you nervous?” he asked as he took her hand to help her up into the buggy.

She nodded. “I’m not sure why. We’ve spent lots of time together, but it just feels different tonight.”

He nodded. “It does to me too.”

“But why?”

He shrugged. “Probably because we made plans to spend time together, so we’ve been anticipating this.” He glanced at her as he

climbed onto the buckboard beside her. "And I'm guessing you want the night to be special as much as I do."

"I do."

With a flick of the reins, he started the horses moving toward town. "I've never been to a church social before. What are they like?"

"I haven't been to one since I was a little girl in New York. They only let us go when it was a fundraiser for the orphanage. Basically, it's a pot luck supper with dancing and lots of talking and having fun."

"Dancing?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. He loved the idea of getting to hold her close with no complaints from anyone.

She nodded. "Do you dance?"

"Of course, I do. I love to dance."

"You do?"

"Definitely. Where I'm from, there were a lot of house parties, and I'd go to them. I proposed to my wife at one of those dances."

"Tell me about her?"

"Rebekah? She was sweet. The daughter of one of my neighbors. I knew her from the time I was old enough to know what a girl was. We played together when we were small, and then we danced together when we were teenagers. We got married as soon as I turned eighteen."

"Eighteen? That's so young!" She certainly hadn't been ready to marry at eighteen.

He nodded. "It is young. Much too young to marry, if you want my honest opinion."

"But you didn't feel that way then?"

He shook his head. "No, I didn't. Don't get me wrong, I loved my wife with everything inside me, but we weren't ready for marriage, and we certainly weren't ready for the responsibility of children."

"Why do you say that?"

He shrugged. "We were still going to parties and staying out all night when we found out she was expecting. We lived with my father, and I helped out around the estate, but really I didn't do much."

"What does that mean?"

He sighed. "I just wasn't much interested in the responsibilities of life. Oh, I enjoyed being married, but only because I didn't have to deal with the responsibilities of really providing for my wife and child. My father died three years ago, and everything changed."

"In what way?"

"I had to become the man I'd avoided being up until then." He parked the wagon on the church's lawn and turned to her, so he could explain more fully. "After my father died, I had to take on the responsibility of overseeing the men who worked for my family. I had to learn what it meant to actually work for a living."

“And did you like it?”

He nodded. “Rebekah didn’t like it, because we didn’t get to see each other much. My family’s holdings were vast, and I was needed a great deal. Father had been ill his last couple of years, and I had no idea how far he’d let things go until I took over myself.”

“Was your mother still alive?”

He shook his head. “She died before I married.” He took her hand, rubbing his thumb over her palm as he spoke. “After Father died, I really wanted to sell it all and head West. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life working the farm, because I didn’t enjoy farming at all. I wanted to go somewhere and do something on my very own.”

“And you finally did.”

He nodded. “Rebekah got pregnant a couple of years ago. I asked her to go West, so we could raise our children away from the parties and wild ways that were so common among our peers. She thought I’d lost my mind. She loved it there. Even pregnant, she thought we should go to every party we were invited to. But I was working too many hours to spend all night dancing. So she started to go to the parties without me.”

“Did that bother you?”

He shrugged. “It didn’t really. I knew it was what she wanted, and I wasn’t surprised. She died having a little girl. As soon as she died, I knew I had to leave. I put my home up for sale within a week.”

“How did Daniel react?”

“He didn’t complain. He was very upset at losing his mother. I thought it would be better for both of us to get out of that house with all the painful memories. I think it has been.” He brought her hand to his lips. “Besides, if we hadn’t come here, I’d never have met you.”

She smiled at that. “Well, I’m glad you came here then.”

“What about you? How did you end up in Texas?”

Evelyn sighed. “I know I told you pieces of it. When I was seventeen, the orphanage where I grew up was taken over by a new church. The church didn’t think girls and boys should be living under the same roof.” She shook her head at the ridiculousness of the situation. “So they sent us here to live in a house they’d purchased for us to live in. They hired a bus driver, and the matron of the orphanage came with us.”

“Really? That’s crazy!”

“It was awful. Everything we’d ever known was gone. They found homes for the younger girls, but there were fifteen of us who were put on that bus and sent away. I was the third oldest.” She got a faraway look in her eyes as she remembered. “When we got here, we were told no one knew we were coming. There was no house waiting for us. There was nothing. The matron, Cassie Hayes, went to the pastor of

the church. It wasn't Micah back then. Anyway, while she was explaining our situation, this old lady came out of the church, demanding to know if we were all bastards. Next thing I knew, she had us all under her roof."

"Edna Petunia. It's great she was willing to take all of you in."

"She's certainly changed my life. I don't know what would have happened to us without her."

"I'm glad you have her then." He sighed. "Someone is going to notice us sitting out here in the dark, and it's going to get back to Cletus. We'd better get inside."

He got down and helped her, grabbing the basket from the back of the wagon. "What did you bring?"

"Just some dinner rolls. I know there will be plenty for everyone, so I made something simple."

"Well, you don't have to impress me with your cooking. I've already tried it," he told her with a wink.

She blushed, taking the arm he offered and walking toward the church with him. When they entered, she smiled as she watched Sarah Jane standing close to Micah, holding his arm and greeting the different couples that came in.

"Evelyn! I didn't know you were coming with Mr. Keifer." Sarah Jane pulled Evelyn into a hug and whispered, "You have got to tell me everything. I heard you're working for him. Are you also courting?"

Evelyn shrugged. "I'm really not sure. He's kissed me a few times, and this is the first time we've had an actual date."

"No chaperone?" Sarah Jane asked.

"You're the only one of us who ever felt the need to be constantly chaperoned. I know how to control myself."

Sarah Jane wrinkled her nose. "As an old married woman, I can tell you, it's hard to control yourself when you're alone. You do what you want, but I think you'd do much better if you had a chaperone with you."

"Duly noted." Evelyn pulled away and smiled at Micah, who had been making small talk with Frank. "Hi, Micah." She looked around. "Where's Chrissy?"

"She stayed with Ruby this evening. I knew it would be easier for us to perform our duties as host and hostess of the party without having to constantly worry about what she's doing."

"That actually makes a lot of sense to me." Evelyn held up her basket. "I'm going to go and add this to the food table."

Sarah Jane nodded. "I expect Micah will bless the food within the next fifteen minutes or so."

Evelyn walked off to put the bread on the table and was startled when she turned around to find Abner directly behind her. "Dance

with me.”

Evelyn shook her head. “No.” There wasn’t even any music yet, so she wasn’t certain why he was trying to get her to dance.

“Why are you here with that Keifer man? You should have come with me.”

“I didn’t want to come with you. I wanted to come with Mr. Keifer. He’s a good man.”

“If you say so.” Abner didn’t look convinced.

“I do.” Evelyn tried to walk around Abner, but the man sidestepped, blocking her path. “What exactly do you want from me?”

Abner smiled. “Do I need to spell it out in detail?”

“I’m not interested in whatever you have in mind. Please, just leave me alone.”

Abner caught her hand and pulled her to him. “Dance with me.”

“There’s no music.” Evelyn refused to give him the satisfaction of squirming against him. “Let go of me, or I will scream and everyone will know you are pestering me.”

“Are you calling me a pest?” he asked, obviously shocked by her words.

“Yes, I am. Let go.”

When he didn’t immediately do as she said, she lifted her foot and ground her booted heel into the top of his foot. “Ouch!” He dropped his hands, and she stepped away.

“Have yourself a nice evening, Abner.” She turned to walk away from him, a satisfied grin on her face. She was pleased that she’d been able to get him to let go of her without asking for help. She liked being independent too much to ask anyone to help her with bullies like Abner.

She ran smack into Frank’s chest. “Was this man bothering you Evelyn?”

“He was trying to,” she said honestly.

Frank put his hands on her shoulders and moved her from between him and Abner. “Do you have a problem with my girl?”

Abner glared at Frank, who was a good six inches taller than him. Evelyn shook her head, wondering why the boy didn’t have more sense than that. “I saw her first.”

Frank stared in shock at the younger man. “You saw her first, so you have a right to grab her? She’s with me. Don’t touch her again.”

“Or what? What do you think you can do to me, old man?”

Frank shook his head in disbelief. “Really? Look, I’m not going to start a fight with you at the church social. It would embarrass Evelyn and she’s worth a great deal more than that.”

Abner looked back and forth between Frank and Evelyn. “I want to marry her.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "Abner, you've dated everything in a skirt who would say yes."

"So what? You're the one I've really loved all this time. All those other girls were practice so I'd be good enough for you."

Evelyn laughed at that. "Right. No, Abner. I have no desire to talk to you, dance with you, date you, or kiss you." She put her hand on Frank's upper arm. "I love Frank. Find someone else." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she was mortified. She hadn't intended to blurt out she loved Frank that way, or any other way for that matter. She turned and rushed from the church, her cheeks flaming.

She was happy for the cold night air, cooling her hot face. What had she been thinking blurting it out that way? Frank Keifer was an older, mature man. She had no right to say something that would embarrass him that way.

Chapter 10

Frank didn't take his eyes off Abner as the words Evelyn had spoken slowly sank into his brain. *Love*? Had she just used the word love?

"Leave her alone. Period." He turned to look at Evelyn, and she was gone. Where had she run off to?

He strode across the church to where Sarah Jane was still standing beside the door, greeting everyone as they arrived. "Have you seen Evelyn?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "No, but Abner is on his way outside, and you can bet that he knows where she is. He's been obsessed with her for years."

"Does Evelyn know that?"

She shrugged. "I doubt it. She never paid him any attention, because he's always been such a ladies' man. He's not someone she'd be interested in."

"You think she's outside?"

"Based on the fact that Abner went out there and didn't come back in, yes. Go after her, Mr. Keifer. I think she cares for you."

Frank turned and ran toward the door of the church, almost knocking over a little old lady on his way. "Excuse me!"

When he got outside, he didn't see them. "Evelyn!" he called, needing to make sure she was safe. Abner wouldn't actually hurt her, would he?

"Over here!" Evelyn called. She was leaning up against one of the old Cypress trees in the church yard.

"Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" She wouldn't meet his gaze. There was no way she'd ever be able to look at him again. "Look, Frank, it's probably best if I don't work for you. One of my sisters can take over teaching Daniel, and I'll go back to helping out at the schoolhouse."

"No. Why? Has Daniel been misbehaving?" Frank didn't understand. She'd just said she loved him, and now she didn't want to work for him any longer. Why was she removing herself from his life?

"Why? Because I just made an idiot of myself. I don't know that I can ever look at you again after what I said."

Frank caught her around the waist and pulled her to him. "Did you mean it?"

Evelyn stared at the knot on his tie, shrugging. "Does it matter?"

He put his index finger under her chin, tilting her face up to his. Lowering his mouth to hers, he kissed her, trying to convey everything

he felt for her in that one kiss. "It matters to me. It matters so much."

She sighed. "I meant it. I don't know how it happened so quickly, but I love you, Frank Keifer. Why don't you take me home? I'll arrange for one of my sisters to be there first thing Monday morning."

He shook his head. "I'm going to take you home. But first, I'm going to talk Micah Barton into marrying us." He caught her hand and dragged her toward the church.

Evelyn dug her heels in. "Not tonight! Edna Petunia will kill me!"

He shrugged. "We'll already be married. What difference will it make?"

"But—"

He turned around and grabbed her, kissing her again. "Daniel is spending the night with someone else. The preacher is right there. What are we waiting for?"

She blinked at him in the darkness. "But why do you want to marry me?"

"I should think that's obvious."

"Not to me, it isn't. Why?"

He sighed. "Because I love you, and I want you to always be in my life." At her look of disbelief, he kissed her again. "I don't know how it happened. I thought you had to know someone for years and years to love them, like I did with Rebekah. With her, love came slowly. It was a gradual build-up over a very long time." His thumb rubbed her bottom lip. "But with you, it hit me like a bolt of lightning. Seeing you in my home every day, seeing you with Daniel. Well, it did something to me. Please Evelyn. Marry me."

She hesitated for a moment. "I—yes, I'll marry you. Not tonight, though."

"Why not tonight? The moon is shining and the stars look beautiful. Sounds like a good night for a wedding to me." He grabbed her wrist and started dragging her toward the church again.

"Frank, Edna Petunia will kill me! Don't you realize you are putting my life in danger?"

He stopped again, looking down at her. "How many younger sisters do you have?"

"Eleven, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"She has eleven more chances for a big wedding to plan. This one is all about the two of us."

He stopped at the church door, bowing his head as Micah led the congregation in prayer. As soon as everyone had said, "Amen," Frank called out across the church.

"Pastor! Evelyn and I want to be married."

Micah grinned at them, nodding. "Sure. When?"

"Now."

Micah laughed, even as Sarah Jane gasped. "You wouldn't!" she said, looking at Evelyn.

"I told him I can't marry him tonight, but he's just not listening to me."

Frank leaned down, his lips against her ear. "Trust me. You want to marry me tonight. You do want to be a virgin on your wedding night, right?"

She nodded. "But I will be whether we marry tonight or in two months."

"No, because I'm taking you to bed with me tonight, whether we're married or not."

Evelyn blushed profusely. "We need to get married tonight it seems."

Micah shrugged. "Everyone here interested in a quick wedding?"

Before Evelyn knew what had happened, she was standing in front of Micah, Sarah Jane at her side.

"What are you doing?" Sarah Jane hissed at Evelyn.

"I have no idea!" Evelyn answered, feeling confused, but happy. Happier than she could ever remember being.

"Edna Petunia is not going to be pleased with you."

"Frank says that doesn't matter because I won't be living under her roof anymore. Besides, you know as well as I do that Edna Petunia wants us all to be married and happy."

Sarah Jane giggled at that. "She does have eleven other girls who will give her a chance at a big beautiful wedding."

"Yeah, she does." Evelyn looked at Sarah Jane and winked. "I guess I'm getting married. Will you come home with me to tell her?"

Sarah Jane shook her head emphatically. "No way! I still remember how disappointed she was with me for my two-day engagement. She'll be furious with your twenty-minute engagement."

"I guess it's a good thing I won't have to live with her, huh?"

Evelyn glanced over at Micah, who was glaring at the two sisters. "Are you done? We're all waiting 'til after the wedding to eat, and that food smells pretty good."

Evelyn smiled at Frank, taking his hand in hers. "I'm ready."

The ceremony was over five minutes later, and Frank was kissing her in front of everyone. "I don't feel married," she whispered.

"Oh, you will," he promised.

Abner walked into the church then, stopping behind Evelyn and Frank. "What did you just do?"

Frank smiled. "I just married the most wonderful woman on earth."

Abner looked hurt. "What? You married him?" His eyes moved to Evelyn, as if he couldn't believe she'd marry another man.

Evelyn looked at Abner. "Yes, I did. I told you I love him."

Abner turned and walked out of the church without another word. Evelyn felt badly for him, but he hadn't led a life anyone would want to attach themselves to.

Frank took her hand in his. "Let's eat our wedding supper, and then we'll go face the music."

She sighed. "I wish I could just wait and tell them tomorrow, but I know Edna Petunia, and she'll wait up until all her little chicks are in the nest."

While they ate their meals, people surrounded them, congratulating them on their marriage. Evelyn felt a nervousness in the pit of her stomach.

When they had finished, she hugged Micah and Sarah Jane in turn. "Thanks for putting up with our change in plans," Evelyn said.

Micah laughed. "Nothing like deciding to get married with a preacher right there. I guess that's why I married Sarah Jane. So many potential weddings in that house."

Sarah Jane wrinkled her nose at Micah. "I hope you married me for reasons other than that."

Micah grabbed his wife and kissed her softly. "I did. Just don't tell anyone."

Sarah Jane blushed, swatting his shoulder. "Don't be kissing me like that in public, Micah Barton."

Micah just wrapped his arm around her waist and kept her anchored to his side. "I think people will understand since we're still newlyweds and all."

Frank grabbed Evelyn's hand and pulled her out toward his wagon. "You were a beautiful bride," he said, kissing her more passionately than he'd dared with all the eyes of the church on him.

As they drove toward the Sanders's house, he kept his arm firmly wrapped around her waist. "You're not nervous about talking to Edna Petunia, are you?" he asked.

She sighed. "A little. She's done so much for me, and I hate to disappoint her."

"I can understand that. We can't go back though. The whole town knows we're married."

"I'll live through it."

When they reached the house, she jumped down without waiting for his help. She needed to get it over with, like taking some disgusting medicine. One big swallow and it would all be over. She hurried to the back of the house and found Edna Petunia and Cletus sitting in the informal parlor as she'd expected.

Edna Petunia looked at Evelyn with a frown. "You're much earlier than I expected. Did you and Frank fight?"

Evelyn took a deep breath before answering. "No, ma'am. We didn't fight. We got married."

Edna Petunia glared at Evelyn. "You got married. You couldn't even wait two days? What is wrong with my girls?"

Frank stepped in behind Evelyn. "You have eleven other girls to have big weddings, Edna Petunia. I practically forced her."

Cletus put the book he was reading on the end table beside his chair. "If you forced her, the wedding isn't legal."

"Oh, it's legal." Frank put his arm around Evelyn. "I talked her into doing it tonight, but she said yes of her own volition."

Cletus shook his head, the disappointment in his eyes palpable. "Are none of you girls going to let Edna Petunia plan a big wedding?"

Evelyn shrugged. "I bet Katie will. She's always dreamed of being a bride. She used to wear bedsheets on her head to pretend they were a wedding veil."

Edna Petunia's eyes sparkled at that. "I'll start talking to Katie about it tomorrow. She'll be the one to do the right thing. I just know she will."

Evelyn flew forward and leaned down to kiss Edna Petunia's wrinkled cheek. "I love you so much. I couldn't have asked for a better mother."

The older woman brushed a tear from her cheek. "Go on and get your things and get out of my house, Evelyn. Coming in here trying to make an old woman cry..."

Evelyn turned to Cletus, kissing his cheek as well. "Thank you for being the father I don't deserve."

"You heard your mother. Go on with you!" Cletus didn't have tears on his cheeks, but his eyes were suspiciously wet.

Evelyn slipped from the room, leaving Frank so she could go and pack her things. She came back down ten minutes later with a suitcase in her hand. "We can come back for the rest tomorrow."

Frank nodded, taking the bag from her. "Yes, we can." Once they were in the wagon, he turned to her. "Are you sad you married me tonight?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. I wanted it as much as you did."

"They're not really mad, are they?"

"No, I don't think so. They love me unconditionally. They made that clear from the first day they took us in."

"So you came to Texas four years ago as an orphan, and now you have parents who love you, fourteen sisters who love you, and a husband and son who love you. What could be better?"

She smiled, resting her cheek against his shoulder. "Maybe a daughter."

“We’ll get to work on that right away.” He kissed her softly before picking up the reins to take them home.

Epilogue

Eight months later, Evelyn stood at the window watching for Frank and Daniel to come home. She still taught Daniel at home, because it worked better for him. Resting her hand on her round belly, she whispered, "You'd better be a little girl. I don't think I could handle another boy like your brother."

She turned back to the cake she was baking. It was cold out now, and she knew her men would be hungry when they walked in the door in a short while. She had coffee brewing, and she'd make sure they enjoyed their end of day treat.

The door flew open just as she was taking the cake out of the oven. "That smells good, Ma!"

Evelyn looked at Daniel. "I hope it tastes good too."

"Everything you bake tastes good. I hope my sister can bake as good as you."

"What makes you think it's a girl?"

Daniel laughed. "She wouldn't dare be anything else!"

Evelyn grinned at that, her eyes going past Daniel to Frank, who stood grinning at her. She hurried over to kiss him. "I missed you today," she said, repeating the words she told him every evening when he came home to her.

He held her close. "Feeling all right?"

She nodded. "Ready to have this baby, but I'm good other than that."

"Just a few more weeks according to Dr. Harvey."

"And then I'll feel like our family is complete," she said with a sigh. She desperately wanted a child of her own, and despite her jests, she knew she'd be happy with a boy or a girl.

"Well, if it's not a girl, we'll just keep trying," he said softly in her ear.

"Sounds like I'm going to win either way."

He grinned his cheeky grin, dimples showing. "You know you already won when I fell in love with you."

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